Thinking in Buddhism: Nagarjuna’s Middle Way

About this Book

Any research into a school of thought whose texts are in a foreign language encounters certain difficulties in deciding which words to translate and which ones to leave in the original. It is all the more of an issue when the texts in question are from a language ancient and quite unlike our own. Most of the texts on which this thesis are based were written in two languages: the earliest texts of Buddhism were written in a simplified form of Sanskrit called Pali, and most Indian texts of Madhyamika were written in either classical or “hybrid” Sanskrit. Terms in these two languages are often different but recognizable, e.g. “dhamma” in Pali and “dharma” in Sanskrit. For the sake of coherency, all such terms are given in their Sanskrit form, even when that may entail changing a term when presenting a quote from Pali. Since this thesis is not intended to be a specialized research document for a select audience, terms have been translated whenever possible, even when the subtleties of the Sanskrit term are lost in translation. In a research paper as limited as this, those subtleties are often almost irrelevant. For example, it is sufficient to translate “dharma” as either “Law” or “elements” without delving into its multiplicity of meanings in Sanskrit. Only four terms have been left consistently untranslated. “Karma” and “nirvana” are now to be found in any English dictionary, and so their translation or italicization is unnecessary. Similarly, “Buddha,” while literally a Sanskrit term meaning “awakened,” is left untranslated and unitalicized due to its titular nature and its familiarity. Another appellation of Siddhartha Gautama, Tathagata, is the only unfamiliar term consistently used in the original. This has been done because translations of the term do not do justice to its mystic import and esotericism.

Finally, two processing errors must be explained. The occasional appearance of an extra space in hyphenated words, such as “self- nature,” is due to an unavoidable conflict between two processing programs used in formatting this document. The extra spaces are not due to poor typing or incomplete proofreading. Second, the reversed opening quotation marks were not fixable.

“Misery only doth exist, none miserable, No doer is there; naught save the deed is found. Nirvana is, but not the man who seeks it. The Path exists, but not the traveler on it.” — The Visuddhimagga

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

The study of Buddhism has in recent years become quite a vogue in the West. Post-Enlightenment Europe found Buddhism to offer an attractive alternative to the authoritarianism implicit in Christianity's doctrine of revelation and in its priestly structure. Buddhism seemed to offer a "natural" religion, one based on common sense and teaching truths accessible to anyone, yet without surrendering mysticism.[1] Buddhism also seemed curious to the Western mind because, like so many Oriental philosophies, it was neither really a philosophy nor a religion, but something with elements of both. As such, it posed unique solutions to the problems of Western thought, as well as whole new types of problems of its own.

The form of Buddhism that has most captured the attention of the West, especially America, is Japan's Zen. Zen represents a religion that is in many ways a diametrical opposite to America's Protestant Christianity. Its unorthodox means of transmission, complete rejection of ritual, doctrine of the spiritual nature of all beings, and emphasis on direct, personal perception of the Truth have proven fascinating to the American mind. Unfortunately, this is often all that is known of Buddhism. It is not uncommon to encounter the belief that Zen represents the culmination of or even the entirety of Buddhism. This is far from true. In fact, it could be defended that the history of Buddhism has witnessed more internal philosophical diversity than almost any other religion, with the possible exception of Hinduism. Even more egregious, the non-doctrinal nature of Zen has allowed Westerners to conflate Buddhism with a number of other systems of thought, be they "Eco- spirituality" or watery "New-Ageism," declaring them all to be compatible. That Buddhism has dogma and is a widely variegated, autonomous religion not always reconcilable with modern philosophies and movements is often not seen.

The uniqueness of much of Buddhism lies in the way it seeks "Ultimate Truth" and the manner of Ultimate Truth it finds. Truth, for Buddhism, is relative. There is no single, unchanging, absolute ground of being like there is in most of the world's thought. To make a broad generalization of Occidental philosophy, the entire Abrahamic tradition, stretching from the pre-Israelites to the Baha'i religion, sees the universe

[1]Cf. Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 300

as in some way contingent on a transcendent, absolute level of Being. Even the most mystical or skeptical of the early Western schools of thought accepted an ultimate essence of reality. For Pythagoras it was numbers, for Heraclitus it was a reification of process itself, for Plotinus it was Mind, and for the Jewish Qabala it was a super-attenuated form of divine light. Even the most skeptical of philosophers, such as Zenoo or Pyrrho, did not deny an ultimate ground of being. Rather, they just said that it was inconceivable. The Oriental religions, too, agree that there is an ultimate essence in things. The Taoists insist that it is utterly ineffable, Advaita Vedanta declares it to be beyond existence itself, and the Materialists deny that it is of the nature of spirit. Nonetheless, all agree that there is an "Ultimate."[1]

In contrast with all of these is Buddhism. The Buddha did not teach that there is an Ultimate, nor did he deny it. He did not declare the Ultimate to be ineffable because mystical and inherently beyond the scope of thought, nor did he embrace agnosticism and say that we just can never know its nature. The Buddha simply would not talk about it. When a concept was discussed in relation to a metaphysical thing, he would declare this concept to be neither wrong, nor right, nor both, nor neither. It just should not be discussed. This approach has no parallels. It is not a form of skepticism, for the Buddha was very clear in enunciating doctrines that his followers must accept on at least a conventional level. It is not agnosticism, for the Buddha did not just say that we cannot know about the nature of Ultimate reality, but rather he said that it truly is "not this, not that, not both, and not neither." It is not pessimism, for the Buddha taught that all unpleasantries can be overcome and that there is a definite goal to be striven for. Finally, it is not mere mysticism, for the Buddha stressed the importance of directing one's consciousness to concrete affairs.

This unique non-affirming non-negating approach of the Buddha is implicit in all schools of Buddhism. It is the most explicit in three: the Perfection of Wisdom school of the first centuries BE., the Madhyamika and Yogacara movement of the first millenium C.E., and Zen and its predecessor, Ch'an, of the modern era. All of these teach the non-dual, non-conceptual, non-existential nature of reality and the applicability of mentation to the pragmatic sphere only. Any one of these three would have been desirable subjects for study.

The one school I chose to research and explain here is Madhyami-

[1]This generalization is not meant to suggest that the philosophies listed agree in any way on the nature of the Ultimate. More, there were trends of thought within some of these philosophies that come very close to the Buddha's theory of the Ultimate; the Rg-veda X.129, for example, states that in the beginning "there was neither existence nor non- existence, …neither death nor immortality," and the Tao te Ching chapter II says that "being and non-being create each other." Nonetheless, the general trend within all of these schools of thought was to seek and find some form of "Absolute."

ka. This school has been chosen partly because early Buddhism has been little studied in the West. Madhyamika has, of late, begun to attract much scholarly attention, but it is still a little-recognized word and an even less- understood philosophy. The Perfection of Wisdom school was, for my purposes, too early to be the focus of study here. It was superseded by and amalgamated into the Madhyamika-Yogacara movement, and so a discussion of the latter will explain much of the former. Yogacara would also have been a fascinating object of study, but I feel that the Yogacara school introduced concepts into Buddhism which were somewhat foreign to the tradition. This is not a criticism, but what I desired to study was Buddhism as expressed by the Buddha. Madhyamika seems to be the better of the two in representing this.[1], where Yogacara is represented as adding to the tradition of Buddhism and completing the move from the original Theravada to the innovative Mahayana. Whether Madhyamika represents the original essence of the Buddha's teaching is a matter of speculation that can never be fully resolved. However, many if not most scholars of Madhyamika are of the opinion that it is perhaps the truest philosophical systematization of the Buddha's ontology. Cf., for example, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, volume I (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1929), 643, or T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (London: George AllenUnwin Ltd., 1960), 55 Perhaps my main reason for selecting Madhyamika was the same as that felt by Europeans over a hundred years ago when they first "discovered" Buddhism: it represents a fascinating approach to philosophy and a general worldview the likes of which are not to be found in the history of Western thought.

Finally, Zen, too, would have been a compelling research topic, and, unlike Yogacara, it does not seem to conflict with or add to the philosophy of the Buddha as preserved in the earliest writings. There is, however, one difficulty in approaching Zen from an academic perspective. Both Zen and Madhyamika agree that concepts have no final applicability, but they differ in their internalization of this fact. If one asks a Zen master what the nature of reality is, one is likely either to be hit or to be told "this flax weighs three pounds."[2] This may be an appropriate way of expressing the school's philosophy of the nature of reality, but it does little good to one who needs to write about that philosophy. A proponent of the Madhyamika school may, in essence, give the same answer as the Zen master.

---

[1]Cf. Gadjin M. Nagao, "Yogacara, a Reappraisal" in Madhyamika and Yogacara (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 219-225

[2]Cf. the anecdotes told of Zen teaching methods in Paul Reps, ed., Zen Flesh, Zen Bones (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books (no impress date))

He or she will, though, at least be kind enough to explain the answer in words and sentences, making this school more amenable to the scholarly approach.

1.1. Notes on the Methodology of this Thesis

The goal of this thesis is to present the philosophy of Madhyamika in as clear and concise a manner as possible. Given both the length and time constraints of this research project and the limited degree of education I have thus far enjoyed, it was necessary to investigate this topic with a tight focus. I have chosen to use only Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika, "Verses on the Fundamentals of the Middle [Way]," as the lens through which to view Madhyamika. This treatise is the premier work both of Nagarjuna and of the school as a whole. It includes all of the main themes of the school, it serves as the model for the school's method of argumentation, and it is the focus of the subsequent history of the school. Following Nagarjuna, Madhyamika commentaries addressed, not just "what did the Buddha mean?", but also "what did Nagarjuna mean?"

In following this procedure of discussing only the Mulamadhyamakakarika, I often faced the tantalizing temptation to draw quotes from other of Nagarjuna's works. There are instances where a concept in this treatise may be spelled out gradually over the course of five or so verses, while the same concept in another text may be expressed succinctly and pithily. Unfortunately, these cannot be quoted in such a context as this. Once another text of Nagarjuna's is used, it is only a short step to back up Nagarjuna by quoting aryadeva, and then only another short step to explain Nagarjuna by recourse to Candrakirti. Since this would ultimately result in a distortion of the treatise, I have deemed it best neither to quote nor discuss any other works.

The other methodological issue I had to consider is whether to use any concepts or tools from Occidental philosophy in this analysis of Madhyamika. There are numerous parallels between Madhyamika and various schools of thought in the Western tradition. These parallels include concepts, intentions, methods, and results. Once again, though, I chose to examine the Mulamadhyamakakarika on its own and within the tradition of Buddhism only. It must be admitted that much understanding of the work may have been lost by such a limitation. Notwithstanding, there are two definite advantages of bringing to bear no Western philosophy here. First, and most simply, I had neither room, nor time, nor sufficient education. Even had I those luxuries, though, I doubt that I would have utilized them. Interpreting Nagarjuna using Occidental tools may seri-

ously misrepresent him. For example, a major criticism of T.R.V. Murti's analysis of Madhyamika is exactly this; in contrasting Nagarjuna with Kant, even favorably, Murti may have seen Nagarjuna through distorting lenses. The approach of this research project is thus to try to arrive at an understanding of Madhyamika by examining only the central work of its central figure with as few contrasts and comparisons as possible.

A final note of the methodology of this project regards which things were selected for examination, and in what depth. What has been chosen was to explain the philosophy as well as possible to the lay, not the scholarly, reader. An extra chapter, "The Buddha and His Teachings," has been included that would not have been necessary had the intended audience been a specialized one. This has resulted in extra length of the thesis, but I deemed it well worth while. The philosophy of the Buddha is not just foreign and difficult for a modern Western audience, but was found to be abstruse even by the Buddha's ancient and Eastern one. Providing plenty of background can only help in understanding this topic.

The depth of this study proved to be a trickier issue. On the one hand, each chapter of the Mulamadhyamakakarika could be summarized in a mere five sentences. On the other hand, fifty pages or more would not be sufficient to explain fully any chapter, and entire books could be devoted to some of them. Likewise for the three subjects highlighted as foundational for the school, i.e. self-nature, dependent arising, and emptiness — each could have been explained in one page or one hundred. The depth I have chosen is thus completely arbitrary, guided only by considerations of what could investigated in one year and in less than two hundred pages total.

Chapter 2. The Buddha and His Teachings

2.1. The Life of the Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, the sage of the Sakya clan, founded a religion that is in many ways the most anomalous of those surviving in the world today. He claimed access to no divine wisdom, no unique intuition, no worldly or spiritual authority, and no super-human status of any kind. The philosophy he taught subverts common-sense notions about what the nature of the world is and uproots the very beliefs that people tend to cherish the most: the existence of God, the reality of the self, the promise of an after-life, and the availability of happiness. In their place he taught reliance on personal understanding and the pragmatic uselessness of mere belief.[1] He taught that all phenomena are impermanent and nothing can be counted on to endure; that there is no soul to be found at any time, in any thing, anywhere; and that the fundamental quality of life, even when it seems pleasant, is radically unsatisfactory. And yet, the religion that has grown out of Gautama's teachings has become a major world religion known for its equanimity, its compassion, and, even, its joy.

Gautama was born in northeastern India in what is modern day Nepal in either 566 or 448 BE. and died eighty years later.[2] Gautama's father Suddhodana was a minor king, the head of the Sakyas. Legend holds that Gautama was so remarkable as a child that soothsayers predicted that he would one day become either a universal monarch or an "awakened one," a "Buddha."[3]

Legend relates that one day, shortly after the birth of Rahula, Gautama requested to see the city that he had never before seen. Unable to

---

[1]Walpola Sri Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 3, 8-10

[2]For a full discussion of the Buddha's dates, see Etienne Lamotte, History of Indian Buddhism, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain-La-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988), 13-14

[3]The following biography of the Buddha is culled from a variety of sources. The scriptural accounts of his life vary, and so this often-imaginative biography is not to be taken as authoritative. Suddhodana wanted his son to be the next head of the clan, and so did everything in his power to keep him attached to the world and oblivious of things spiritual. Gautama was provided with fine clothing, expensive perfumes, courtyard gardens and lily pools, and all worldly delights, and was attended by female musicians in three palaces, one for each season. Strict orders were given that he was not to be exposed to any uglinesses or unpleasantries. He married a neighboring princess, Yasodhara, at age sixteen, and they had a son, Rahula, when he was twenty-nine.

dissuade him, his father had runners clear the streets of all unpleasant sights and then allowed Gautama to be taken out in a chariot. Serendipitously, or, as some legends hold, at the will of the far-seeing God, the young prince was exposed to four shocking sights which the runners had missed. First, Gautama saw a decrepit man, gray-haired, broken-toothed, and bent with age, by the side of the road. Since he had seen few humans other than his family and his 40,000 dancing girls, he asked his charioteer in astonishment what sort of creature the man was. That is what happens when people get old, explained the driver. The next day, the prince asked to go out again. Though his father doubled his efforts to clear the streets of all unpleasant sights, a sick person was missed. On seeing the person lying by the side of the road, racked with disease, Gautama again turned to his charioteer in surprise. That is illness, he was told. The following day he embarked on another tour on which he was exposed to the sight of a human corpse, and thus learned of the fact of death. Legend or not, this story portrays an important element of the Buddha's later teachings: while the facts of age, sickness, and death are known to us, it is still easy to forget them, and a direct confrontation with their reality is often a novel and disturbing insight.[1] Unless one is aware of suffering, one will never seek to improve one's condition, a fact of which the Buddha was to make much use.

The prince made one more excursion into the city the next day, and, again, he was exposed to something he had never before seen — a saffron-robed renunciant with a shaven head, a begging bowl, and, most importantly, a tranquil and serene demeanor. That night, after returning to his palace, he realized that all of his previous pleasures were now but hollow delights. He waited until Yasodhara and Rahula were asleep, took one last look at his son lying in his wife's arms, kissed them both, and left. Such an exit was seen by some of the later writings as setting a precedent for the renunciant monastic disciplines the Buddha later organized, and the seeming callousness of it is mitigated by the claim that he had to leave his family for the future benefit of all beings, that is, so that he could attain his enlightenment and then teach it to others.[2] It is also pointed out that he was clearly not abandoning his family, for his son later became one of his greatest disciples. However, the sense of solitude, spiritual desperation, and determination portrayed by this episode is not lessened.

It was with such a sense of determination that Gautama embarked on the next stage of his life. He had seen the suffering from which he had

[1]Harvey, 18

[2]ibid., 18

been sheltered for so long, and then he had seen proof in the form of the renunciant that such suffering can be conquered. He now set himself the goal of learning how to conquer it. He saw that his many years of living in opulence had not taught him the way to enlightenment, so he now tried the opposite path. For six years he practiced renunciation and asceticism. He first practiced raja yoga in an attempt to conquer suffering through meditation and the control of consciousness. Gautama soon surpassed his teachers by attaining states of elevated awareness higher than the ones of which they were capable, but did not feel that he had reached his goal yet. He left his yoga teachers and joined a group of ascetics to practice rigorous physical austerities. His strong sense of determination led him to practice self-mortifications so severe that he nearly died.

By the time he could barely stand up and all of his hair had fallen out, Gautama realized that asceticism was not going to bring him to his goal, either. He recollected that he had once spontaneously experienced a certain meditative state that could provide a path to awakening, and decided to give it one last try. He took food, left the group of ascetics, and sat under a tree, determined to gain enlightenment or die. As he began to meditate, the legendary demon tempter, Mara, assailed him first with visions of beautiful women and then with violent storms in an attempt to prevent Gautama's immanent enlightenment. Gautama ignored Mara and entered deeper into meditation. He passed through state after state of consciousness until he achieved the enlightenment he had so long sought, nirvana. He was now a "Buddha," an "awakened" one. Reflecting on what he had found, he saw himself as presented with a difficult choice, which is sometimes portrayed as being Mara's final assault. He could either selfishly enter parinirvana, the state of "nonreturning" liberation, or he could postpone the final, ultimate freedom and return to the world to teach. The latter option seemed pointless, for the awakening that he had experienced was so profound, so subtle, and so "beyond the sphere of reason" that he feared it would be pointless to try to teach it to anyone else. The deciding factor was the Buddha's enlightened insight into the oneness of all beings, which led him to sympathize with the suffering of others. He felt compassion and realized that he must return, even if for the sake of only one person's understanding. Thus began the ministry of the Buddha.

The biographies in the canonical texts, the sutras, give only sparse information of the Buddha's life following his nirvana. A likely explanation for the greater emphasis on his earlier life than on his later is that the core teaching of the Buddha is the "path" to follow, the process one must go through to realize nirvana for oneself. Thus, the Buddha's personal search for awakening is more important than what he did after he had

found his goal. The general picture conveyed by the few details available is that he spent the rest of his life wandering around the Ganges basin area on foot, with few possessions, teaching his ever-growing group of disciples. Much of his teaching method would have been seen as subversive by the society around him. He taught in the local languages and dialects, spurning the Sanskrit which by this time was already associated exclusively with the educated, elite priestly caste of Hinduism.[1] He taught with no distinction, associating with all classes and castes of men and women. He also shunned both the isolation of the forest and the community of the cities, preferring to reside and teach in the outskirts of the urban areas. After wandering and teaching for forty-five years, the Buddha prepared for his death. He asked his followers if they had any last questions. When no one spoke, he told them “All conditioned things are impermanent. Work out your salvation with diligence!”[2] and entered parinirvana, the final liberation.

2.2. The Thought of the Buddha

The philosophical system that the Buddha taught is remarkably clear and simple. It would, however, be very easy for a presentation of his thought to degenerate into hundreds of pages of confusion and nonsense, and it could be argued that much of the history and doctrinal development of Buddhism has been just such an endeavor of obfuscation. His teaching is simple in that it can be summed up in two words: the keyword of his philosophy is “impermanence” (anitya) and the keyword of his religion is the “path” .[3] All elements of the Buddha’s teachings fall out from these two concepts. The purpose of the Buddha’s teachings is to bring people to their own enlightenment by means of the “Noble Eightfold Path,” the prescriptions for living the “noble” and beneficent life. Thus, while his philosophy is the subject of this thesis, a brief presentation of his soteriological teachings will be apposite here. The key to the moral life is following the “middle way” between extremes. The Buddha had attained enlightenment by renouncing the two extremes of worldliness and world-renunciation. Neither his twenty-nine years of living in luxury nor his six

---

[1]Michael Coulson, Sanskrit (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1992), xvii

[2] Maha-Parnibbana-Sutta in T.W. Rhys- Davids, trans., Buddhist Suttas (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), VI.10

[3]The question of whether or not Buddhism is a religion will not be considered here. For purposes of this discussion, “philosophy” will be taken to mean the intellectual explanation of reality, and “religion” will be taken to mean the quest for salvation. Further discussion of this question can be found in Regington Rajapakse, “Buddhism as Religion and Philosophy,” Religion 16 (January, 1986): 51-56

years of living in self-denial had led him to his goal; it was only after he abandoned such extremes that his search came to an end. The first sermon the Buddha delivered after his enlightenment opened with an admonition to give up both the seeking after pleasure and the practice of asceticism. The correct way to lead a proper life, he taught his first audience, is "the middle path, …a path which opens the eye, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind," and eventually to nirvana. [1] The significance of following the middle way is greater than merely the renouncing of the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism: the middle way is the principle which infuses the entire corpus of moral teachings of Buddhism.[2]

Buddhism is primarily a path, not a philosophy. As has been aptly stated, Buddhists often insist "If you wish to understand the Buddha's doctrine, you must practice it!"[3] The Buddha likened the human situation to a man who has just been shot with a poisoned arrow by an unknown assailant. If the man refuses to have the arrow removed until he finds out who shot him, what caste the assailant is from, what color his skin is, how tall he is, what kind of bow he used, and what types of feathers were on the arrow, that man will die. The important thing for the man to do is to remove the arrow. The arrow in the side of humanity is afflicted existence, duhkha. The poison on the arrow is the cause of duhkha, which cause is craving. The way to remove the arrow of duhkha and the poison of craving is by following the Buddha's path and teachings, the Dharma.[4] Duhkha cannot be satisfactorily translated into English. It conveys the sense of the words "evil," "unsatisfactoriness," "unpleasantness," "imperfection," and "disease." The most felicitous single translation is "suffering." Even if not exact, this is the term encountered most commonly in translations. The fact of suffering constitutes the first of the Buddha's four "Noble Truths." All things that are temporary and conditioned are suffering, duhkha. Encounters with unpleasant things are, of course, suffering, but even pleasant things are suffering because of the fact that, being conditioned, they are subject to ending.[5] The cause of suffering is

[1]Dhamma-Cakka- Ppavattana-Sutta 3 in Rhys-Davids

[2]Whether or not, and in what way, such "middle-ism" also defines Buddhist philosophy will be discussed in chapters four and five.

[3]Geoffrey Parrinder, ed., World Religions (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1983), 271 (italics in original)

[4]The complete parable can be found in Henry Clarke Warren, ed. and trans., Buddhism in Translations (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 117-122

[5]It may be important to introduce here the concept of conditionality, for it is a concept that will surface again and again in the following thesis. Briefly, a thing is conditioned if it arose depending on a cause, such as a sprout arises depending on the existence of the seed, or if it exists depending on a ground of support, as fire exists depending on the fuel it is burning. A thing is also called "conditioned" if it depends on something else for its differentiation and definition, as

the second Noble Truth. Suffering is occasioned by desire, be it the thirst for pleasure or the craving for existence itself. This desire, having impermanent things as its object, will always be frustrated because it can never be satisfactorily fulfilled. The third Noble Truth is that it is possible to put an end to such desire and thus rid oneself of suffering. Ridding oneself of suffering occurs when one realizes the nonreality of existence in a peculiar state known as nirvana, or freedom. Thus far, the Buddha presented an analysis of the human experience which states that all existence is inherently unpleasant due to its impermanency, that the reason we find impermanent phenomena to be unpleasant is because we entertain desires and cravings which cannot be satisfied by ephemeral things, and that the key to finding satisfaction is to put an end to such desires.

The fourth and final Noble Truth is that there is a method available to us by which we can appease desires and thus attain nirvana. This way is presented as the Eightfold Path. The path is a systematized guide for living which will enable one to curtail attachment to transitory things and to train oneself in proper modes of thought and behavior to eventually achieve liberation. The eight limbs of the path prescribe behavior which is “samyak.” “Samyak” will here be translated as “right,” but it also carries the overtones of “complete” and “perfect.”[1] A fuller understanding of “samyak” can be had by keeping in mind the importance of “middle-ism” as described above. Renouncing all behavioral extremes leads to a comportment that could best be described as “moderate;” observing moderation in all actions and thoughts and desires will lead, not just to proper behavior, but also to the very enlightenment which is the goal of Buddhism. The Eightfold Path opens with two guidelines for perfecting wisdom, namely right (samyak) views and right thought. Personal apprehension of the Buddha’s teaching, his Dharma (henceforth translated as “Law”), is an essential aspect of accepting the Law and proceeding on the path. This understanding must be translated into right thought, the attitudes of the individual towards the rest of the world. Right thoughts are selflessness, compassion, and non- violence. This is followed by three guidelines for morality, namely right speech, right conduct, and right livelihood. The moral life is not required merely for reasons of compassion for others; appeasing the desires that cause one to suffer will be accomplished in large part by leading a life free from egocentricity, greed, and selfish goals. The final three steps on the path, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, detail the spiritual ascesis without which the attainment

---

“shortness” only exists in relation to “longness.” Only something which is uncaused and has an autonomous identity can be unconditioned.

[1]cf. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, ed., A Sanskrit-English Dictionary (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 1181

of nirvana would be impossible. Right effort and mindfulness prescribe the importance of being focused on the goal of liberation, and avoiding all things which would be karmically unwholesome. Right concentration, samadhi, is that drive of pointed meditation which allows for liberation, the final abandonment of all desires and the attainment of alert equanimity and bliss.

The philosophy of the Buddha rests on one simple observation: all things are impermanent (anitya). Impermanence is the first of three fundamental marks of existent things, and from it follow the other two: suffering, and "soul-less-ness." Transitoriness is the fundamental property of all existent things, for all things come into being, persist for a time, and then pass out of being again. Without such impermanence, no change would be possible, and thus neither would liberation be possible. That is, it is the susceptibility of all things to change that allows one the option of controlling one's life and following the Eightfold Path. The Buddha's emphasis on the reality of impermanence should not be seen as a doctrinal dogma as much as a simple perception. Not only is continual flux perceptible to all who have insight, but, moreover, a balance in reality requires that any thing which comes into existence must also, some day, go out of existence.[1]

The significance of impermanence is beautifully expressed by the parable of the conversion to Buddhism of the two friends Sariputta and Moggallana. Seeking enlightenment and having found it nowhere, they made the pact that they would split up and whoever should first realize nirvana would come and teach the other. Sariputta went his way, and encountered a saintly monk, placid of disposition and perfect of deportment. What is your secret, brother? asked Sariputta. Whom do you follow, and what is the truth you have found? The monk replied that he was but a novice and a new-comer to the doctrine that he had found, and so could not expound the doctrine or describe its teacher. He could, however, offer to Sariputta this tidbit of the teaching: all things that arise will cease, said the monk. On hearing this, Sariputta suddenly understood, clearly and distinctly, the noble doctrine, and became enlightened. He returned to his friend Moggallana who, upon seeing Sariputta from afar, immediately perceived that a profound change had come over his friend. What is the truth you have found? asked Moggallana. I don't know the doctrine or its teacher, replied Sariputta, but I can tell you this: all things that arise will cease. On hearing this, Moggallana, too, became enlight-

[1]The use of the problematic term "reality" must be explained. That signified by "reality" is usually taken to be the real, i.e. that which exists. Here, it will occasionally be used to refer to the cosmos as a whole, to the entirety of nature, yet without expressly signifying "existence." For lack of a better term, the reader is asked to accept that "reality," used here, is not necessarily meant to imply existence as such, and the meaning of the term will vary according to context.

ened.[1] A refusal to accept transitoriness is the cause of suffering, as briefly discussed above. A perception of such impermanence and of suffering, its corollary, is the key to liberation. Humans tend to desire, and desires do not exist in a vacuum — they are always desires for something, and if the object of the desire is subject to flux, then the desire will, sooner or later, be frustrated.

The third mark of existence is also a direct corollary of impermanence: there is no permanent, abiding, unchanging soul, atman, to be found in any existent thing. This is perhaps the most revolutionary of all elements of the Buddha's philosophy, for his time period was one of great emphasis on the reality of the soul in the dominant zeitgeist of India, Hinduism.[2]The period of the writing of the principal Upanisads had only recently ended, and the orthodox schools of Indian thought were abuzz with theories of the individual soul and its relation to Brahman, the universal soul. By denying the reality of atman, the Buddha was subverting one of the most cherished of all concepts in Indian religion. However, the doctrine of soullessness, anatman, was an inescapable conclusion of the perception of flux; if all existent things are subject to change, then there can be no unchanging essence that exists. And if one tries to escape that conclusion by positing a soul "beyond" the realm of existence, then one arrives at the same answer: the soul does not exist. It is meaningless to posit something that is beyond existence, for it would be in no way real.

The three marks of existence — impermanence, suffering, and soullessness — define the nature and quality of reality as taught by the Buddha. Inquiring into the ultimate cause and purpose of existence and its ontological nature is fruitless. It is not that the answers to such metaphysical questions are beyond human understanding, nor that the answers sought are conceptually inexpressible; it is simply that they are irrelevant. If you do not remove the arrow now, said the Buddha, you will die. One must leave metaphysics alone, for the only thing of importance is to follow the path.[3]

Notwithstanding, the Buddha was in no way misologistic. That he did not scorn the use of reason and philosophy is demonstrated by the fact that the first two limbs of the Eightfold Path are right views and

---

[1]Warren, 87-89

[2]Rahula, 55

[3]A usage note is required here. The term "metaphysical" will be encountered often in this thesis, and so a clarification of its meaning is crucial. Metaphysics must not be understood as pertaining to the study of the supernatural, the mystical, or the New Age movement; this is a very recent use of the word. Metaphysics is the branch of rational philosophy that examines the nature of reality, especially the relationships between mind and matter and substance and attribute. This includes the connotational meaning of a priori speculation upon questions that are unverifiable by observation, analysis, or experimentation.

right thought. He offered a positive metaphysics by presenting a complete teaching of causation known as the theory of pratitya-samutpada, "interdependent origination," or "dependent arising." As a teaching of the nature of all existent things, dependent arising is a comprehensive philosophy which explains the origin of perception, the essence of the individual, the workings of karma, and the nature of previous, present, and future lives. Dependent arising is an extremely lucid and rational explanation of the nature of all existent things, but not one that is easy to understand without a great deal of reflection. The following explication of dependent arising is thus not intended to be an explanation as much as a brief introduction. (No more than an introduction is necessary here, because the theory will be discussed extensively in chapter five.) Dependent arising, simply, is the principle that all existent things are conditioned and relative by virtue of having come into existence as interrelated phenomena. When this arises, that arises; when this ceases, that ceases, explained the Buddha. Impermanence and its corresponding dictum of soullessness preclude the possibility of there being permanently-enduring or independent and self-subsisting phenomena.

The "chain" of dependent arising consists of "links" of mutually interacting causes and effects. The root of the chain is ignorance, avidya, on which basis the second link, preferences and dispositions, comes to be. On the basis of these preferences arises the third link, volitional will and consciousness. This consciousness gives birth to the fourth link, the psychophysical individual. The individual then experiences sensory stimulation which creates in him or her desires to have certain sensations and to avoid others, which is a process of the next three more links. On the basis of these desires one develops cravings, link nine, and grasps onto perceived existence itself, link ten. This grasping and clinging to existence is the cause of all suffering, for it leads to the eleventh link, birth and rebirth, which is followed by the final link of old age, disease, and death. The key to enlightenment, or cessation of afflicted existence, is the reversal of the process by which afflicted existence has arisen. One must appease, or let go of, cravings. In order to do this one must seek wisdom, which wisdom will undercut ignorance, the initial cause of the chain.

Although presented as a linear chain, dependent arising should be understood as a circle, for all of the links of the chain influence all of the other links. It is tempting to look at the ultimate cause of the chain, ignorance, and ask what caused it to come into being, and thus embark upon infinite regress. There are two reasons that this would not be appropriate, one philosophical and the other pragmatic. First, it would not be proper to seek a cause for ignorance avidya), for ignorance is not a positively existing entity. Rather, it is a lack. One does not inquire into the cause of

darkness, for darkness is nothing but the lack of light. Second, the "cause" of ignorance is utterly irrelevant for the Buddha's teaching. Ignorance is a deadly poisoned arrow which must be removed; where the arrow came from is not important.

It is often said that the Buddha was neither a prophet nor simply a teacher, but was a spiritual doctor. His presentation of the four Noble Truths paralleled the practice of medical doctors in his day which was to 1) diagnose a disease, 2) identify its cause, 3) determine whether it is curable, and 4) outline a course of treatment to cure it.[1] This was exactly the Buddha's method. All humans are afflicted with the disease of suffering; this disease is caused by ignorance and the cravings which can follow ignorance; this disease is not an unregenerate condition but can be cured; the cure is to follow the Eightfold Path of moderation and understanding, which will lead to enlightenment and freedom.

The Buddha's teachings may thus far appear simple and straightforward. This may be true, but for one condition. All unenlightened humans, according to the Buddha, are immersed in the mud of ignorance, and are thus incapable of seeing clearly. "Men who are overcome by passions and surrounded by a mass of darkness cannot see this truth," he once thought to himself.[2] However, there were also times when he reassured his disciples that his philosophy was inherently difficult to grasp. Speaking to his disciple Vaccha, he said "Profound, O Vaccha, is this doctrine, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, …and it is a hard doctrine for you to learn."[3] Whether the difficulty of comprehending the Buddha's teachings is due only to the obscuring passions of humans or whether it is indeed inherently abstruse, the subsequent history of Buddhism demonstrates that the Buddha's teachings were anything but unambiguous to his disciples and later Buddhist thinkers. The varieties of interpretation of the Buddha's thought that have been propounded in the last two-and-a-half millenia bear ample witness to this. It is this diversity of interpretation that was to engender the Madhyamika school six hundred years after the Buddha's death.

---

[1]Harvey, 47

[2]Source not named: quoted in Rahula, 52

[3]Majjhima-Nikaya, quoted in Warren, 126

Chapter 3. Early Buddhism and The Historical Context of Nagarjuna

3.1. The Person of Nagarjuna

Legend reports that, in the second or third century C.E., a young Brahmin named Nagarjuna mastered the Vedas and all of the existing Hindu sciences, including magic, while still a young boy. When he was a teenager he used his magical abilities to render himself and two of his friends invisible so that they might slip unnoticed into the royal harem of the local king's palace. They took advantage of the situation and then made their escape. On attempting to leave, however, his friends neglected to make themselves sufficiently invisible and were caught and executed. Nagarjuna escaped, but this experience caused him to reevaluate the desires which had caused him to come so close to peril.

Inspired by this episode, Nagarjuna entered a Buddhist monastery. In a mere ninety days he studied and mastered the whole of the Pali canon, the early writings of Buddhism. He left the monastery in search of more advanced teachings of the Buddha that he felt sure must exist. One day he was expounding upon the doctrine of the Buddha to a group of listeners and noticed that, following the lecture, two members of the audience disappeared into the ground. He followed them to what proved to be their home, the kingdom of the Nagas, a land inhabited by beneficent, half-divine, serpent- like beings. Here the Nagas presented Nagarjuna with occult teachings and with several volumes of sutras, canonical scriptures. These writings were the Prajnaparamitas, the "Perfection of Wisdom" sutras. The Buddha had delivered these sacred teachings centuries before but had decided that they were too profound for his contemporaries. He arranged to have them hidden for safekeeping in the nether world until humankind had acquired the necessary sophistication and spiritual development to allow them to appreciate these teachings of "perfect wisdom." Now that the world was ready, Nagarjuna was permitted to spread the Buddha"s final teachings.[1] This colorful legend,

[1] One of the most complete Buddhist accounts of Nagarjuna's life is to be found in the eighteenth-century Tibetan text "Presentation of Tenets" by Jang-gya. cf. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., A Study of Svatantrika (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion

like most, is told with many minor variations. Unfortunately, there is not much known about Nagarjuna besides these legends. It is certain that he was an actual historical person remarkable for his brilliant and energizing philosophical spirit.[1] His influence was so great that he was regarded as more than merely an important philosopher. The teachings of the Buddha were seen as the "first "turning of the wheel,"" the setting in motion of the dispensation of universal law, Dharma. The teachings of Nagarjuna came to be regarded by the majority of Buddhism as the "second turning of the wheel," i.e. the renewal of and expansion of the Buddha's original doctrine. Throughout northern India he is still spoken of as a veritable manifestation of the Buddha, and his teachings are revered equally with "the sutras from the Buddha's own mouth."[2] Aside from such fanciful reverence of Nagarjuna, this much is certain: he is generally agreed to be, by his admirers and detractors alike, the acutest thinker in Buddhist history.[3] His commentaries on Buddhist philosophy had such a great effect on the world of Buddhism that a schism which had been brewing for some time, that of the new "Greater School" of Mahayana diverging from the "Older School" of the Theravada, now became crystallized and irrevocable.[4] Nagarjuna's alleged "authorship" and elucidation of the Prajnaparamita writings seems to have provided the Mahayana with a claim to unique mystical insight which allowed this school to divorce itself from what it considered to be the "lesser" teachings of the Theravada.

Some of Nagarjuna's contemporaries found his thought to be so unique and worthy that they regarded him as the founder of an entirely new school of wisdom, the Madhyamika. New "Madhyamika" texts sprung up, many of which aimed to be nothing more than interpretations of Nagarjuna's writings. This new school was so compelling and vibrant that it, too, witnessed schisms into sub-schools.

Some scholars have interpreted the philosophy of Nagarjuna as an innovation, a revolution in Buddhism. Others see Nagarjuna's philosophy as being little more than a clarification and restatement of the Buddha's doctrines. To investigate the thought of Nagarjuna and to address these claims, a brief summary of Buddhist intellectual history from the time of the Buddha to the time of Candrakirti, Nagarjuna's most famous

---

Publications, 1987), 245- 252. A comprehensive account by a modern scholar can be found in K. Venkata Ramana, Nagarjuna's Philosophy (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1966), 25-70

[1]Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 520

[2]ibid., 520

[3]Mervyn Sprung, trans., Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters of the Prasannapada of Candrakirti (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979), 1

[4]cf. D.T. Suzuki, Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 60

commentator, is apposite. When Nagarjuna completed his study of the original Pali canon and went in search of more teachings of the Buddha, it appears that he was confronted with a multitude of contending schools of philosophy.[1] The debates which both preceded and were contemporary with Nagarjuna surely influenced his thought and a summary of them will help in achieving an understanding of the Madhyamika school.

3.2. Some Early Controversies

A central point of the Buddha's thought is that all is in flux; nothing which exists can remain unchanged. A natural implication of this is that the Law, the Buddha's teaching itself, would also suffer corruption and change. The original scriptures announced various prophesies regarding this change. Some predicted that the Law would remain pure for only 500 years, others that it would endure for a thousand. Following this period of pure understanding, mere scholarship would replace spiritual achievement.[2] The simple fact of the Buddha's historical life becoming a more and more distant memory is only part of the story. It appears that the very methods of the Buddha's teaching began to lose their efficacy, for the early writings contain accounts of large numbers of people, sometimes thousands at a time, achieving sudden enlightenment merely by hearing the Law.[3] Gradually fewer and fewer cases of conversion were reported, until the conviction spread that the time of sainthood was over. One sutra conveys this sentiment clearly by describing the death of the last saint at the hands of one of the scholars.[4]

Setting aside the fact that, according to the Buddha, flux is inevitable, there are three obvious reasons why the Law witnessed change and reinterpretation. One reason is simple geography.[5] The teachings of the Buddha were born in northern India and from there rapidly spread east and west, eventually becoming diffused across the whole of southern and eastern Asia. Following the death of its founder, such broad decentralization of the message and the concomitant divergence of interpretations was inevitable. A second factor which precipitated change was the fact of applying the Law to daily life and all of its concerns. No matter

[1] Ramana, 37

[2] Edward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 114-6

[3] cf., for example, Warren 302, where a sutra reports that "the conversion of eighty-four thousand living beings took place."

[4] Conze 1975, 116

[5] ibid., 119

how complete the Buddha's teachings, inevitably some question would arise which he had not addressed. These were usually precise disagreements over proper comportment of the monk, such as when to eat food and whether to accept money as a gift.[1] A third and perhaps principal source of contention and change was the somewhat agnostic stance of the Law itself. The Buddha did not leave the community with a single source of authority following his death, telling the monks to seek and follow the Law for themselves. This likely left the monks with a sense of freedom to interpret the Law as they wished.[2] He also had consistently refused to give conclusive answers to many types of metaphysical questions, as the parable of the arrow shows. However, as the Buddha fully knew, the human tendency to enquire into such intangibilities is practically ineradicable. People were wont to philosophize on even those very subjects about which the Buddha forbade speculation. This inevitably led to differing opinions about the nature of reality. Even some modern scholars have been misled by the Buddha's apparent agnosticism, calling it a "vagueness" in the Buddha's teachings, a vagueness which caused "a great divergence of views" to arise.[3]

Buddhism remained relatively free of internal controversy for the first two centuries after the Buddha's death. Minor disagreements over points of doctrine persisted, but were not a major cause for concern. Then, during the reign of King Asoka, 272-236 BE., another disagreement, this one regarding the nature of the saint, arose and threatened the unity of the Order. King Asoka, a nominal Buddhist whose influence in Buddhist history was enormous, wished to restore peace to the Order. While the precise history of the debate is uncertain, a few elements of it are widely accepted as being authentic and, more important to the topic at hand, had a direct bearing on Nagarjuna's work.[4] Asoka invited a respected monk, Moggaliputtatissa, to convene a synod of monks to discuss and settle disagreements. Moggaliputtatissa compiled the proceedings of this council in a text that, despite being written two and a half centuries after the Buddha, was so influential that it quickly was accorded canonical status.[5] Although two hundred and eighteen specific topics of monastic discipline and philosophy were debated, the key philosophical issues boil down to three: "Personalism," "Realism," and "Transcendentalism."[1]

---

[1]Michael H. Kohn, trans., The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 37

[2]David J. Kalupahana, A History of Buddhist Philosophy (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 125

[3]M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (London: George AllenUnwin Ltd., 1967), 196

[4]A more comprehensive discussion of the dates and the background of Asoka can be found in Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, A History of India (London: Routledge, 1990), 64-70

[5]Kalupahana 1992, 126

The Personalists were the Vatsiputriya, nicknamed the Pudgalavada after "pudgala" = "person;" The Realists were the Vaibhasika and Sautrantika sects of the Sarvastivada, the latter nicknamed after their belief that "all," "sarva" exists (on the Sautrantika, see also page 124f.); The Transcendentalists were the Lokattaravada sect of the Mahasanghika, so nicknamed due to their belief in the " lokuttarra," the "supramundane." This factional history, though technically confusing and incompletely documented, has extensive import, for it was a precursor to the bifurcation into the "Greater" and "Lesser Schools" of Buddhism. Broadly speaking, the Mahasanghika led to the formation of Mahayana, while their opponents, the Sthaviravada, became the Hinayana, or Theravada. These three will be summarized here and treated more fully later.

Broadly speaking, Indian philosophy has witnessed two opposing traditions regarding the ultimate nature of reality. One tradition, which is represented by practically the whole of Hinduism, asserts the existence of an immanent and transcendent "soul," the atman. The atman is the soul both of the human individual and of the universal God. It is the ultimate ground of being and is immutable and eternal. Buddhism, on the other hand, denies this substratum. It presents a doctrine of anatman, "soullessness." The Buddha taught that there is no abiding self, but rather just five ever-changing aggregates (skandhas) of elements: physical substance, sense-contacts, perceptions, psychological tendencies, and consciousness. The individual person is an aggregate of these five categories, and each category is in itself an aggregate of composite elements (dharmas and dhatus). For example, the category of physical substance is an aggregate of earth, air, water, and fire, and the category of psychological tendencies is an aggregate of habits, likes, dislikes, greed, willfulness, etc. The idea of a "person" is just a convenient way to refer to these five categories and aggregates of elements. It is a mistake to believe that there is an underlying and unchanging self in this dynamic agglomeration of fluctuating elements. However, a small group of monks insisted that, nonetheless, the individual self must be in some way real. If there is no self more real than and transcending the aggregates of elements, they argued, still at the very least it should not be wrong to say that the self is no less real than the aggregates. They claimed that there is a subtle self which is neither identical with nor different from the agglomeration of elements.[2] Although Moggaliputtatissa and all other Buddhist schools rejected this "Personalist" argument, the notion proved to be tenacious

[1]This division, which is perhaps somewhat simplified and artificial, will be encountered repeatedly in this thesis. It can also be quite confusing, and, hence, it should be summarized and more technically clarified here.

[2]Harvey, 85

and long-lived. As late as the seventh century C.E. a full one-quarter of Indian monks claimed adherence to the Personalist school,[1] and Nagarjuna as well as numerous later writers, both Madhyamika and otherwise, felt compelled to address this misbelief.[2] The "heresy" of Personalism presumably arose because some Buddhists were unwilling to abandon completely the belief in the soul, and so claimed that the aggregate of elements did not fully preclude the possibility of a self. The controversy of "Realism" also arose from the doctrine of the aggregates, but for an exactly opposite reason. The Realists asserted that, if there is no metaphysical soul behind the aggregates, then the aggregates themselves must be real. If the soul is not an ultimate entity, then the individual atomistic elements (dharmas) of which the world is composed must be ultimately real. These elements are reified, they taught, and each has its unique and individual atomic "self-nature," svabhava. Only thus could the Buddha's teaching that all aggregates are in perpetual flux be reconciled with the fact that objects are observed to have individual and continuous identities. [3] Furthermore, these atomistic elements are themselves eternal and unchanging; while their form and the objects of which they are a part may change, their self- nature, svabhava, remains real and constant. Hence the label "Realism." The Realists were quite vocal against the concept of Personalism and insisted that the Buddha's doctrine of anatman allowed no room for any type of belief in self-hood. However, their assertion that the atoms comprising the world have individual self-natures was seen by other Buddhists as being an unjustified realism or as just another form of Personalism. Criticism of their concept of self-nature became one of the key issues of the Madhyamikas.

The third false doctrine which Moggaliputtatissa reports being discussed was Transcendentalism. The Buddha had left the community of his followers with no single source of authority following his death, telling them instead to "be lamps unto [them]selves." "The truths and rules of the order which I have set forth and laid down for you all, let them, after I am gone, be the Teacher to you."[4] Despite these words which the Buddha delivered from his deathbed, many disciples came to believe that the Buddha had totally transcended the world, not just ceased to exist. Mahayana Buddhists came to believe that, although the physical Buddha was dead, his intelligence and his teachings remained in a form called the

[1] ibid., 85

[2] Nagarjuna, David J. Kalupahana, trans., Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way: the Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), XVI.2 and XXIV.29-30

[3] ibid., 22

[4] Maha-parinibbana Suttanta II.33 and VI.1, in Rhys Davids

"Dharma Body."[1] Although it was claimed that this transcendent form did not really exist (for that would contradict the Buddha's doctrines), still the Dharma Body is an expression of the ultimate reality, the true nature of things.[2] The Dharma Body came to be known by diverse terms, such as "Buddha- nature," "Thusness," or "Suchness of Existents," and its nature has been interpreted in many ways. Moggaliputtatissa refuted this belief in a transcendent nature of the Buddha by demonstrating that it is incompatible with the Buddha's historicity.[3] Nagarjuna dealt little with the theories of Transcendentalism, but it became an important topic for later Madhyamikas.[4]

3.3. Abhidharma and the Perfection of Wisdom Writings

Between the third century BE. and the third century C.E. a group of writings whose purpose was the systematization of certain elements of the Buddhist philosophy took shape. This was the Abhidharma, "Further Teachings." This collection of writings purported to be, not a new set of teachings, but merely a codification of the old. As such, it was accorded a canonical status and, along with the sutras, the Buddha's discourses, and the Vinaya, the monastic rules, comprises the official three-tiered Pali canon. There was little controversy over the sutras and the Vinaya; although there is some variation in the latter between schools, the two are almost universally accepted in Buddhism. The Abhidharma, however, elicited a certain amount of conflict in subsequent Buddhist thought.

The purpose for compiling the Abhidharma was to distill the essentials of the Buddha's teachings on philosophy and psychology from the discourses and attempt to avoid the inexactitudes and ambiguities occasionally found in these scriptures. This codification was achieved by stating everything in exact language and thereby providing a detailed enumeration of the elements of reality (dharmas), the basic causal processes observed to operate between the elements (pratyayas), the exact constituents of the human personality and consciousness (skandhas and ayatanas) and, finally, to draw out the relations and correspondences between all of these factors.[5]

---

[1] Paul Williams, Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations (London: Routledge, 1989), 176

[2] ibid.,175

[3] Kalupahana 1992, 141-3

[4] cf. Williams, 175-179

[5] Harvey, 83

The endless lists and classifications found in the Abhidharma, which one modern commentator has characterized as "ten valleys of dry bones," [1] might seem to be of little interest to all but the most devout Buddhist. There are, however, two reasons why the Abhidharma directly relate to the study of later Buddhist philosophy: the Abhidharma provided an exhaustive analysis of the base constituents of reality, and it uncovered much of the implications of dependent arising, the process by which these elements come into being and are perceived. What the Abhidharma achieved was also twofold: its analysis of the elements coherently and comprehensively described reality without any recourse to a theory of self-hood or ultimate reality, and it refined the doctrine of dependent arising by showing how the basic patterns of causation condition each other in a web of complex ways.[2] Notwithstanding, the Realist school managed to find in the Abhidharma classifications support for their view that the elements do have a self-nature, svabhava, a view which had definite repercussions on the doctrine of dependent arising.[3]

The Abhidharma literature was avowedly part of the "Older School," Theravada. Its sole purpose was to systematize the teachings found in the Pali scriptures, and it made no use of the innovative interpretations and doctrines that were becoming an important aspect of the "Greater School," Mahayana. The Abhidharma was, however, being written during approximately the same time as the Prajnaparamita writings. These "Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita)" writings mark the inception of and the core teachings of the Mahayana,[4] a school which defined itself in large part as being the "new" Buddhism no longer bound by the limitations of the old. The Abhidharma provided the starting point for the Perfection of Wisdom school, both as historical influencer and by being the focal point of criticism. Further, the Abhidharma thinkers did their job so well that subsequent thinkers, such as those of the Prajnaparamita, had no choice but to adopt a different tack in interpretating and expounding the Buddha's teachings. That is, the general approach of the Abhidharma thinkers was to take the agenda of analysis and systematization to its furthest extreme. "Rarely in the history of human thought has analysis been pushed so far," said the scholar of Buddhism Etienne Lamotte.[5] The result of this is that the Perfection of Wisdom writings, representing a reaction to this influence, are quite unlike those of the Abhidharmas in

[1]Nyanatiloka Mahathera quoted in Kalupahana 1992, 147

[2]Harvey, 83

[3]Kalupahana 1986, 22

[4]based on distinctions made by Edward Conze. cf. Conze 1975, 121-125

[5]Lamotte, 605

style, thought, and intent.

The Perfection of Wisdom scriptures are a collection of voluminous writings from ca. 100 BE. to 100 C.E. which emphasize the ultimate incomprehensibility of the world. They utilized paradox and even nonsense to demonstrate that true wisdom is intuitive and cannot be conveyed by concepts or in intellectual terms.[1] The writers of the Prajnaparamitas regarded the Abhidharma of the Older School of Buddhism, with its dry emphasis on the proper path towards and means of achieving enlightenment, the rules of the Order, and the niggling debates over fine points of ethics, as being on the wrong track.[2] This approach stifled the essence of the Buddha's teaching, which essence is that all doctrines are empty of reality and are but mental creations. According to the Prajnaparamitas, true wisdom consists, not in cataloguing doctrines, but in intuitively understanding that the true nature of the universe is this emptiness, sunyata.

The Perfection of Wisdom writings were in many ways a reaction to certain trends found in Abhidharma thought, particularly that of Realism. The Realist school, though refuted by Moggaliputtatissa, remained a potent force in philosophical discussion for some time. A primary Prajnaparamita criticism of this realist trend was that it did not go far enough in understanding the Buddha's doctrine of anatman.[3] The Realists accepted that there is no substantial soul abiding in the person, but just a series of fluctuating elements whose agglomeration gives the appearance of a self-identity. However, as explained above, the Realists took this analysis of elements too far. To explain reality without invoking atman, the Realists defined the elements as being point entities having absolutely small spatial and temporal extension. To reconcile this infinitesimal atomism with the fact that the individual elements still interrelate and that continuity is experienced, the Realists had to posit a form of self-nature.[4] The Prajnaparamitas saw this explanation as falling short of the mark.

The predominant themes of the Perfection of Wisdom teachings do not differ either from the teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the discourses or from the explanations of reality given in the Abhidharma. That is, the essence of reality does not allow for real change or decay, origination or extinction, identity or differentiation, unity or plurality, existence or non-existence. All of the above are imagined only by the ignorant. The criticism lies in the fact that some Buddhist schools were

[1]Kohn, 171

[2]Zimmer, 485

[3]Harvey, 97

[4]Kalupahana 1986, 22

not satisfied with this description of reality and felt the need to add the notion of svabhava, self-nature. This is not necessary, the Prajnaparamitas taught, for the Buddha's theory of dependent arising is alone sufficient to explain all perceptions of the world and its elements as well as fully explain the ways in which these elements exist and interrelate.

The authors of these texts most likely had no intention of producing innovative theories and saw themselves as just explaining the teachings of the Buddha in a deeper and more profound way, relying more on insight than on intellect. Nonetheless, the Perfection of Wisdom writings are often defined as marking a clear transition from old to new, Theravada to Mahayana. The emphasis on emptiness as a characteristic of reality "revolutionized" Buddhism "in all aspects," writes modern commentator T.R.V. Murti.[1] While the intention of these writings was not to produce innovations in philosophy but just to teach with a different emphasis, their method of philosophizing was decidedly original. The Prajnaparamita adopted a dialectic that was only implied in the original discourses, that of seeking the middle between all extremes, and utilized this dialectic to a much fuller extent. This rejection of extremes led to the assertion that all dualities are empty of reality. Notions whose basis is one half of a duality, such as existence and nonexistence or atman and anatman, can be used to speak of common, everyday truths, but their applicability fails when referring to ultimate truths. The ultimate reality is devoid of all dualities and thus is wholly impervious to conceptual thinking. It can only be accessed in non-dual intuition, prajna.[2] There are thus two levels of truth: the everyday, relative truth and the higher, absolute truth. One should not be confused, the Prajnaparamita taught, by the Buddha's use of words like "person" or verbs like "exist," for he used these words only pragmatically, as a necessity for discussing commonly perceived things. He in no way intended for such relative concepts to be reified or applied to the absolute sphere.[3]

The Perfection of Wisdom writings set the tone for what would become the majority of Buddhism, the Mahayana. Its anti- dogmatic rejection of extremes, mystical mood, use of paradox, and emphasis on intuitive wisdom are still famous in the form of Prajnaparamita that has come down to us today, Zen.[4] This collection of works was also found quite compelling by Nagarjuna and the subsequent Madhyamika school.

---

[1]Murti 1960, 83

[2]ibid., 86

[3]Peter Della Santina, Madhyamaka Schools in India (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 12-13

[4]cf. David J. Kalupahana, "Reflections on the Relation between Early Buddhism and Zen," in Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 163-176, or Kalupahana 1992, 228-236

3.4. The Main Figures of Madhyamika

It was to the exposition of the philosophy of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures that Nagarjuna, "one of the subtlest metaphysicians the human race has yet produced,"[1] devoted himself. Although it is almost certain that Nagarjuna did not write or discover them, as legend claimed, he may have been influential in the formation of some of them, and he certainly is to be credited with systematizing them and offering the most coherent and authoritative interpretations of them.[2] Furthermore, many scholars, both ancient and modern, regard Nagarjuna's Madhyamika as the proper systematization of the voluminous and often unorganized Prajnaparamita writings. His philosophy, though, is not to be seen as a mere commentary on these sutras. He offers slightly revised interpretations of their key concepts, i.e. dependent arising, emptiness, and self-nature, and he draws out more fully the implications of the two truths. His basic philosophical method is to take the Buddha's exhortation to follow the "middle way" and apply this "middle-ism" to all sets of dualities. Hence the appellation for this school: "madhyama" simply means "middlemost."[3] The Madhyamika method does not deal with dualities by attempting to arrive at a compromise between the two sides or by formulating a position that lies between the two. Rather, it attempts to supersede the sphere of conceptual thinking and its attendant dualistic modes.

As Nagarjuna's philosophy is the primary subject of this investigation, no more than the briefest summary of his school will be presented here. Conceptual thinking operates using dualities, especially that of subject versus object, perceiver versus the external world. However, Nagarjuna taught, it is this very process of intellection and our grasping onto its products, i.e. concepts, which prevents us from realizing enlightenment. One must "appease" the tendency to conceptualize, and it is this appeasement which will allow one to see through the illusions of dualities and grasp the "true nature" of things, the tathata. This true nature is formless and beyond conceptual distinctions. It is devoid of self-nature, and so is described as being "empty," sunya. The fact of dependent arising, i.e. the fact that all existing things come into and go out of being only in dependence with other existing things and that no thing can exist "on its own," as it were, also demonstrates the fundamental "emptiness" (sunyata) of

---

[1]Zimmer, 510

[2]Richard H. Robinson, Early Madhyamika in India and China (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 61-65

[3]Monier- Williams, 782

all things. If one wished to speak in absolute terms and seek the ultimate ground of being of the universe, one could say no more than that the universe is characterized by ultimate emptiness. This is not a pessimistic denial of existence, though, but rather just a description of the way things are. One who sees the true nature of things simply perceives that they are empty of self-nature. This realization, far from being nihilistic, is actually the very means by which liberation is achieved.

Nagarjuna is credited with a great number of writings. Even excluding those which are possibly or definitely not his, we are still left with a large body of work. Nagarjuna wrote theoretical scholastic treatises, collections of verses on moral conduct, teachings on Madhyamika practice and the Buddhist path, and a collection of hymns.[1], for a list of writings attributed to Nagarjuna and a discussion of their relative authenticity. This range of works demonstrates that his concern was not just scholastics and theory but also monastic discipline and, as attested by his hymns, religious veneration. The range of his thought, its acuity, and his genuine devotional attitude to the Buddha inspired a number of subsequent commentaries and independent works. The Madhyamika tradition enjoyed a vibrant history in its native India until at least the eighth century C.E. The philosophy was around this time imported to Tibet, where the Tibetan king declared it to be his country's authoritative form of Buddhism.[2] Despite encountering various historical vicissitudes, it remains the foundation for Tibetan Buddhism even today.[3]. It must be admitted that this latter point is uncertain. Herbert Guenther writes that "Reports coming from Tibet are uncertain…With the annexation of Tibet by China, a chapter in the history of Buddhism… came to a close. (Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987 ed., s.v. "Buddhism: Tibetan Schools.") Notwithstanding the uncertainty of the situation in Tibet, though, the exiled Buddhist community outside of Tibet is definitely keeping the Madhyamika tradition alive. Cf. C.W. Huntington, Jr., The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 9

aryadeva was the chief disciple and successor of Nagarjuna, and it is to him that the Madhyamika system owes much of its popularity and stability. Nagarjuna directed his dialectic primarily against the Abhidharma philosophy, but, by the time of aryadeva, there was need to consolidate the Madhyamika system against non-Buddhist systems as

[1] cf. Chr. Lindtner, Nagarjuniana: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nagarjuna (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 10-8

[2] Kohn, 132

[3] Santina, 23

well.[1] Aryadeva can be credited, along with Nagarjuna, with founding and systematizing the school of Madhyamika.[2]

The school began to encounter internal controversy approximately three centuries later. A monk named Buddhapalita produced a commentary on Nagarjuna's major work, the Mulamadhyamakakarika (henceforth abbreviated as karika). In his commentary, Buddhapalita refuted the positions of his opponents using the tactic of "reductio ad absurdum," a logical method whereby a position is shown to result in unresolvable absurdities. The true Madhyamika can have no position of his or her own, Buddhapalita wrote, and thus has no need to construct syllogisms and defend arguments. His or her sole endeavor is to demonstrate that no philosophical position whatsoever is ultimately acceptable; upon scrutiny of a theory and its consequences, the theory inevitably dissolves into nonsense. This section of Madhyamika is known as the Prasangika, after prasanga, "[logical] consequences."

Buddhapalita's near contemporary, Bhavaviveka, also wrote a commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika, in which he disagreed with the Prasangika refusal to adopt a philosophical position. He argued that one must advance a theory that is independent, svatantra, to provide a proper counter-argument to the opponent's position and thus establish the Madhyamika position. Buddhapalita used logic only to demonstrate the untenability of an opposing theory, and then abandoned the logic. In contrast, Bhavaviveka felt that the Madhyamika did have a certain justification for using and defending logical argumentation. This school became known as the Svatantrika, the "Independents."[3] The main difference between the two schools was that they disagreed on the proper way to interpret Nagarjuna's karika. As such, it may seem that the dispute is trifling. This may be true — it may be the case that the only real difference between the two is the character of the arguments which they employed in order to convince their opponents of the truth of the Madhyamika, a philosophy which they mutually shared. However, the significance of their different approaches may go deeper than that. The issue which divides the two schools may be the result of their very interpretations of reality and the degree to which they accepted Nagarjuna's wholesale denial of self-nature.[4]

The last figure in the history of Madhyamika who will be discussed

---

[1]Murti 1960, 92

[2]ibid.

[3]The names Prasangika and Svatantrika are not found in any Sanskrit texts, and were probably coined by later Tibetan scholars. Cf. The Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987 ed., s.v. "Madhyamika," by Kajiyama Yuichi

[4]Santina, xvii-xviii

here is Candrakirti, who lived in the first half of the seventh century. He was the chief and most famous exponent of the Prasangika school. His commentary on Nagarjuna's karika, the Prasannapada, is of the utmost importance to us today because in this work is the only copy of the karika which has survived in the original Sanskrit, and, moreover, the Prasannapada is the only commentary on the karika which has itself survived in Sanskrit. This fortuity aside, his influence on the Madhyamika school is second only to that of Nagarjuna. His contribution to Madhyamika literature is immense and erudite. He reaffirmed the reductio ad absurdum approach of Buddhapalita, and, largely through Candrakirti's efforts, the Prasangika school became the norm of the Madhyamika. The form of Madhyamika which he championed was still studied in the monastic schools of Tibet and Mongolia as late as this century, where it was considered to represent the true philosophical basis of Buddhism.[1] (It is no longer studied in the Tibetan monasteries, because they have been destroyed. Cf. Guenther.)

---

[1]Theodore Stcherbatsky, The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana (London: MoutonCo, 1965), 67.

Chapter 4. Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika

4.1. Structure of the Karika

A study of Nagarjuna's philosophy encounters many initial obstacles. Not only can his thought itself seemingly be impenetrable, but also the mythical stature he has acquired obscures much understanding of him. One modern scholar of Nagarjuna has admitted that the veneration of Nagarjuna "at times reached such ridiculous heights that his name was sanctified and stamped everywhere with reckless abandon."[1] One result of this is that often it cannot be determined precisely which works attributed to him are authentically his.

Of the more than one hundred texts bearing Nagarjuna's name, only thirteen are almost certainly his.[2] There are two reasons that it is difficult to determine which of these many works are his: One, his influence was extensive and his name venerated. It was not uncommon in Indian tradition for an adherent of a school to attribute a work to the school's original founder, as a means of paying respect. This certainly happened within Madhyamika. Two, there was likely more than one author actually named Nagarjuna, and there may have even been many.[3] Of these thirteen works that were authentically written by the Nagarjuna in question, one stands out as being his chief work: the Mulamadhyamakakarika, "Verses on the Fundamentals of the Middle [Way]."[4] , to be paramount; this verse concluded with the term madhyama pratipat, "Middle Path," and the treatise was named after it. (Nagao 1991, 190) This work stands supreme primarily because of its inherent merit, both in terms of philosophical acuity and innovativeness. It is also one of the few works that are indubitably his. The treatise also deserves to be regarded as unique because it was historically pivotal; it inspired a number of subsequent commentaries by other

---

[1]Kenneth Inada, quoted in Kalupahana 1986, 3

[2]Lindtner, 9-11

[3]A. K. Warder, Indian Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), 375

[4]Nagao writes that the name of this work was likely given to it by the Sino-Japanese tradition. This tradition found one verse of the treatise, XXIV.18

acclaimed thinkers and galvanized Buddhism into developing a wholly new school of thought based on this work, the Madhyamika, the "Middle Way" school. Finally, the Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan traditions are all unanimous in considering the karika as Nagarjuna's magnum opus.[1]

The karika consists of 450 sententious verses.[2] These verses have been preserved in the form of twenty- seven short chapters, each dealing with one topic. (For sake of clarity, it was necessary to differentiate between Nagarjuna's chapters and the chapters of this thesis. To solve this, Nagarjuna's chapters will henceforth be referred to as "sections," and the word "chapter" shall be taken to refer to chapters of this thesis.) The entire karika, minus commentary, would only run to thirty or forty pages. The chapter (section) structure in which the text is preserved is possibly a later formalization, most likely by Candrakirti. This is evidenced by the fact that the section titles provided by Candrakirti are often misleading as to the actual contents of the section, and also because copies of the karika preserved in Chinese and Tibetan occasionally contain very different section headings.[3]

The verses are written in a precise metered form which was the staple of classical Sanskrit composition.[4] Each verse consists of two lines of exactly sixteen syllables each which, while not rhyming, are very poetic and rhythmic when read aloud or chanted. Part of the reason for this writing style was to facilitate memorization. Books were often preserved in writing by this period in time, but the chief means of transmission was still oral. However, this is not the only import of the karika's poetic structure. Nagarjuna was not merely a reflective philosopher. He was a monk, and the purpose of monasticism was to facilitate meditation and traveling the path to enlightenment. This work, like his hymns, was surely intended to be an aid in meditation. One could memorize the karika and meditate on it by contemplating one verse at a time. The verses were not intended to be prosaic explanations of a philosophical position, but rather were meant to illuminate, in a terse and often aphoristic manner, certain precise aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of reality and the proper path. Although the meaning of the verses is usually clear, there are many that defy interpretation. Like the famous Zen koans, some verses seemingly make no attempt to explain a philosophical theory but instead aim to provoke an immediate transcendence of conceptual limitations.

---

[1]Lindtner, 10

[2](448 verses plus 2 in the dedication)

[3]Sprung, xv

[4]Coulson, 250

4.2. Methodology of this Examination of the Karika

There is no easy and obvious way to approach the karika. Most modern interpreters have opted to approach it by analyzing in isolation the broader topics with which it deals, such as anatman or dependent arising, and pulling quotes and examples from all sections of this work and from other works to explain each topic. Other scholars have chosen to select merely one subject of Madhyamika to address, such as emptiness, or one methodological consideration, such as the use of dialectic. Such approaches seem unsatisfactory for the present examination of Madhyamika because only the karika and its themes are the focus here, not the spectrum of Madhyamika as a whole. Attempts have also been made to categorize the sections of the karika into larger groupings of several chapters each and indicate the broad themes which Nagarjuna supposedly had in mind with each section.[1] This approach, too, can be misleading and has no definitive validity; ultimately it may reveal little more than the interpretive bias of the interpreter. The most fruitful approach in the present context will be first to present in summary form the scope and thought of the karika itself and only afterwards to discuss its broader philosophical meaning and possible intent.

There are two admitted drawbacks of this approach, i.e. examining the karika and the karika alone. One, it will not be possible to present "the thought of Nagarjuna" as a whole. Other of his works show different sides to his thought and character and provide fruit for differing interpretations of his place in the broad spectrum of Buddhist thought. For example, the karika makes almost no mention of any of the themes which came to be emblematic of the "Greater School" of Mahayana, [2] However, even this mention does not demonstrate Nagarjuna to be an advocate of Mahayana. and so it could be objected that an examination of the karika only would attribute too much "Older School"-ness to him. A second drawback is that presentations of his concepts could often be made clearer by recourse to other of his or his follower's works. It will be responded that these two drawbacks are not debilitating, and may not even be handicaps. An exposition of solely the karika can be defended because this work is truly the cornerstone of the entire subsequent Madhyamika school in all of its variety. The karika is the vitalizing influence of Madhyamika and all the main themes of the school are to be found in it. As mentioned above, the Buddhist tradition is unanimous in considering it to be the keystone of Madhyamika and perhaps even the single

[1]cf. Kalupahana 1986, 27-31

[2]The only exception is one mention of the Bodhisattva-career in XXIV.32.

most influential work in all of Buddhism after the original sutras.

What would perhaps be most desirable would be to skip a section-by-section analysis of the karika and jump straight to a discussion of its broader themes and significances. An attempt to do this was the initial intent of this thesis. What quickly became apparent, though, was how great the amount of background knowledge necessary to make sense of this work and how little of this knowledge could be presupposed on the part of the reader. Take, for example, this wonderfully cryptic verse: "The arising of arising is exclusively the arising of primary arising. Again, the primary arising produces the arising of arising."[1] (All quotations from the karika, unless otherwise noted, are from the translation of David J. Kalupahana in Kalupahana, 1986.) Lest the reader be kept in suspense, this verse is explained in context below, page 57. The obscurity of such a statement is not the fault of the translation; the above is perhaps the clearest translation of this verse available. It is not to be assumed that the meaning of a verse like this automatically becomes pellucid if one has a background in Buddhist philosophy, but it does illustrate the difficulties one faces in attempting to comprehend and communicate Nagarjuna's thought. It was thus deemed necessary to summarize the basic themes of each of the twenty-seven sections, one by one, and briefly introduce the reader to the concepts contained therein. Only after this has been done can broader observations be made and the philosophical significances extracted. Certain translations of Madhyamika thought have presented only selections from the original works, sometimes calling them the essential selections.[2] The implication of this pointed out by David Kalupahana, translator of and commentator on the Mulamadhyamakakarika, is that the remaining sections are inessential.[3] This thesis will not adopt that approach. While the following exposition of the karika may appear lengthy, the reader must be assured that prolixity has been scrupulously avoided and only the few most essential themes of each section have been mentioned.

Nagarjuna was both a Buddhist monk and an apologist for Buddhism. It is the Buddha's philosophy, and this philosophy only, that engaged his thought and veneration, as evidenced by frequent references to "the Buddha(s)" and "the fully enlightened one." One thought informs the whole karika: the Buddha taught that there is no substantial essence underlying and supporting the manifest world.[4] A "substance" is that

---

[1]karika VII.4.

[2]e.g. Sprung 1979

[3]Kalupahana 1986, 27

[4]The reader's attention is called to the etymology of the word "substantial:" the Latin roots are sub = "under" + stare =

which stands under something and provides the ground of being for it. The abiding soul and / or an absolute God posited by some schools of thought is, by definition, not dependent upon any element of the world for its existence, and the Buddha's philosophy holds that anything that is not dependent cannot be real. It would either transcend or precede existence, and thus could not exist. Notwithstanding, the mass of humanity perceives and believes in the real existence of the world, all the elements contained therein, and the characteristics of and relations between these elements. Nagarjuna devotes the majority of his sections to an analysis of these aspects of the putative world, such as cause-and-effect, the senses, action, and time. Following this, he examines the Buddha's teachings themselves, focusing on the nature of the enlightened being, the Noble Path, enlightenment itself, and dependent arising.

4.3. A Presentation of the Treatise

4.3.1. Section 1 — Causation, and some Initial Problems

Nagarjuna devotes his first section, "Examination of Conditions (pratyayas)," to the subject of causation. A discussion of causation had to precede his examination of the elements of reality (dharmas), for it is a thing's origin that determines its ontological status. Discussion of causal theories held a paramount place in Indian philosophy, because it was felt that a system's theory of causality reveals the method of the entire system. [1]

The Buddha's explanation of the causal process is dependent arising: "if this arises, that arises. If this ceases, that ceases." It is unlike any of the non-Buddhist theories of causation which fall in one of four categories: self- causation, other-causation, a combination of the two, or no causation. The first, self- causation, is exemplified by the Vedic tradition of asserting the reality of the immutable Universal Soul, atman. Briefly, this declares all effects to be inherent in their cause, which cause is in every case some form of the eternal atman.[2] A problem with self- causation is that the effect must be inherent in the cause. If so, then nothing new has occurred or come to be. Other- or external- causation declares all change to be produced by some form of a deus ex machina, such as God, fate,

"to stand."

[1]Murti 1960, 166

[2]cf. David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1975), 6-15

or a deterministic self- nature.[1] A problem with other-causation is that if cause and effect are different then the relation is lost, and, for example, fire could be produced from water. A third type of causal theory advocated by some schools is basically a combination of the self- and other-causation. The problem with this is that both of the above two problems are compounded. The final option is that neither self- nor other-causation operates, which position is in effect an indeterminism that denies all causation. If anything were to emerge ever, anywhere, then everything could emerge at all times, everywhere.

The philosophy of Nagarjuna almost defies interpretation. By the second verse of the first section, one is already hard-pressed to explain exactly what Nagarjuna is saying. Following an introductory dedication to the Buddha,[2] he opens the karika with, in the first verse, what would appear to be an unqualified rejection of all the possible theories of causation. “No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause,” he declares. [3] This can be, and has been, interpreted to be a pure denial of causation. In the next verse, though, he lists the four conditions (pratyayas) that function causally: “There are only four conditions (pratyayas), namely, primary condition, objectively supporting condition, immediately contiguous condition, and dominant condition.”[4] The word he uses here for “condition,” pratyaya, was often found in the early Buddhist texts as a synonym of “cause.”[5] A condition, in this context, is a foundation on the basis of which a thing can come to be: ”[There] are conditions (pratyayas), because, depending on them, [things] arise,” defines Nagarjuna.[6] A condition (pratyaya) seems to be a cause which is necessary but not sufficient. It is that which cooperates in causing a thing to arise, but is not the sole cause of its arising. The difficulty of interpreting Nagarjuna’s statements lies in the fact that, even if a condition is only a part of the cause, it is still a cause. He has thus, in the first two verses, denied the tenability of the four non-Buddhist theories of causation, only to follow it with an assertion that conditioned causal relations do exist.[7]

There are a few very different ways to interpret Nagarjuna’s stance

[1]ibid., 5

[2]discussed below, pages 115-118

[3]karika I.1

[4]karika, I.2

[5]Kalupahana 1975, 54

[6]karika I.7

[7]A comprehensive discussion of the four conditions (pratyayas) Nagarjuna mentions in verse two is beyond the scope of this examination.

on causation. Of the hundreds of commentaries on and studies of Nagarjuna's philosophy since his death, the main hermeneutical approaches boil down to only a very few, and these few come into play even at this early point in the karika. A brief summary of the various hermeneutical approaches is necessary here, at the outset, partly because they offer differing ways to reconcile verse one (denial of causality) and verse two (affirmation of causality), but also because they will be seen to surface again and again in various guises throughout this presentation of the karika. One way to interpret the disparity between the two verses is that Nagarjuna is being selective about what type of causation he admits. A "cause" in the sense of an active and determinate force that effects change is rejected. What is admitted is only that, if certain conditions (pratyayas) are present, a thing can arise dependent on them. A second possible interpretation is that Nagarjuna in verse one is only denying that a causally-arisen existent is evident; the causal process could perhaps be claimed to be either hidden or transcendent, and thus not accessible to human perception. A third interpretation also rests on the word "evident:" Nagarjuna could be claiming that, while causal relations are perceived by an unenlightened person, they are seen as illusory and unreal by the one who has realized nirvana. Fourth, the crux of the argument could be the concept of real existence. Verse one declares that no existents are evident that have come to be through the workings of causation. Perhaps things do arise from causes, but these things do not really exist. Whereas the previous interpretation holds that the causal processes are illusory, this position would state that it is the ontic status of the elements themselves that is under attack. A final exegesis is that mentioned earlier: Nagarjuna can perhaps be seen as rejecting causation in all its forms and manifestations.[1]

It may seem hasty to present so many interpretations so soon. However, as mentioned, an immediate discussion of them is warranted, for, while here the various positions relate only to Nagarjuna's treatment of causation, they can and have been applied to almost all of the topics he examines. The five interpretations as they relate to this context and their broader implications can be summarized as follows: 1) Nagarjuna accepts causation, but selectively. He isolates exactly which theory of causation he supports, clarifies this theory, and rejects the rest. 2) Nagarjuna rejects the human ability to understand the process, in this case the workings of cause-and-effect. The mysterious mechanics of the universe are either too transcendent or too esoteric for human investigation to access. 3) The

[1]Kalupahana solves this apparent contradiction between the first two verses simply by stating that Nagarjuna was denying causation but was neither denying nor confirming conditionality. This interpretation is questionable and, even if it is valid, the problem is not wholly resolved.

whole process as well as its products are illusory. The individual mired in the sphere of relativities may believe that the world has certain qualities, but these specious beliefs evaporate when one attains enlightenment and sees the true nature of things. 4) The issue arises due to a mistaken understanding of existence. There are conditions (pratyayas) dependent upon which things come to be, and one can speak of cause and effect relative to these things, but they do not enjoy the status of having substantial existence. Having no measure of independence, they cannot be said to be real. 5) Nagarjuna is rejecting everything for the sake of nonsense. He denies causation only to follow it with an assertion of causation. The point of this is to force his readers to abandon concepts altogether and achieve an unmediated awareness of the absolute, and nonconceptual, nature of the world. These five opinions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It will be seen that most or all are accurate in certain situations and that there may not be any one single exegesis that will be accurate in all situations.

The following summary of the karika will first present Nagarjuna's basic arguments on each topic and reserve commentary until all elements have been examined. The above five interpretations can be kept in mind to help understand his themes and what to make of them. It is hoped that this will not prove too confusing at times; the reader is to be reassured that generalized elucidation is forthcoming.

The majority of this first section seems to be an examination of what type of relation holds between the effect and the conditions pratyayas) which gave rise to it. The self-nature of the effect is not evident in the conditions (pratyayas), he says in verse three, so the relation between cause and effect is not one of identity. The effect is not inherent and preexisting in the cause. If it were, then the self-nature of the effect would have to exist before the effect itself came into manifestation. Yet this implies eternalism and leads to a philosophical impasse like that the atman school faced when forced to explain how change could occur if self- nature is eternal and immutable. Neither, however, is the effect a new creation that is wholly different from the cause. If the effect were not preexistent in the condition, then effects would not depend on causes. This would allow for utter randomness — anything could arise at any time.[1] It is thus not appropriate to see the effect as arising either from conditions (pratyayas), which implies eternalism, or from non-conditions (pratyayas), which implies anarchy.

Nagarjuna also demonstrates that one cannot view either conditions (pratyayas) or the effects arising from them as existent. The two options

[1]karika I.12

are that an effect either existed or did not exist at the time it was brought into being, but neither position withstands scrutiny. The reason is that neither of the two elements of the equation, the "effect" and its "cause," can exist independently. They come into being only in dialectical relation to each other, and neither can be isolated and examined separate from its dialectical component. If the effect is said already to exist at the time of its rising, then what is the use of saying it had a cause? If it already existed, then the concept of a cause becomes superfluous. However, neither can one say that the effect did not yet exist at the time of its arising. If so, then what would be the function of a cause? "Of what use is a [cause] of the existing [effect]?" asks Nagarjuna.[1] Neither can one attempt to resolve the dilemma by positing some agency that is either a combination of existence and nonexistence or is a rejection of both. There is thus no way to attribute any form of existence to an effect and still speak of its cause. "Since a thing that is existent or non-existent or both existent and non-existent is not produced, how pertinent in that context would a producing cause be?" Nagarjuna summarizes.[2] Nagarjuna's clear presentation of the implications of cause-and-effect demonstrates that the entire problem stems from an over-analysis of the categories. There is only a problem if one attempts to separate cause and effect and speak of each in isolation. While the argument is clear and seemingly incontrovertible as he presents it, the consequences of his conclusion are far- reaching. If cause and effect arise only in mutual dependence, as the Buddha taught, then all talk of real existence must be abandoned, a radical conclusion indeed.[3]

4.3.2. Section 2 — The Relationship between Nominal and Verbal Subjects

Section one does not exhaust Nagarjuna's explanations of causality, for he discusses it throughout the entire work and examines it in greater depth especially in sections four and twenty. His intent in opening the karika with a brief examination of causality probably was to preclude any initial misunderstandings and to refute the theories of causality which were both the dominant theories in the non-Buddhist world and which

---

[1]karika I.6. (pratyaya translated by me as "cause." cf. Monier-Williams 673)

[2]karika I.7

[3]It may seem that an inherent contradiction in Nagarjuna's philosophy is exposed by his language: in the very act of denying the reality of either existence or non-existence the verb "to be" is used. For example, verse XXV.10 reads "nirvana is neither existence nor non- existence" (italics mine). This problem stems from translation only. Unlike English, Sanskrit does not rely on the verb "to be" to express relations. In this example, the original is "na bhavo nabhavo nirvanam," which literally reads "Neither existence nor non- existence nirvana." (Curiously, though Sprung pointed out this problem, he neglected to answer it. Cf. Sprung 12)

also had become prevalent within Buddhist philosophy. His next subject, "Examination of the Moved and the Not-Moved," is an investigation of the process, rather than the elements, of dependent arising. The Buddha's doctrine of dependent arising shifted the ontological emphasis from one of static "being" to one of dynamic "becoming." It is the use of verbs rather than nouns that can express reality and its intrinsic fluctuant nature. Nagarjuna discusses the notions of change by examining one concrete example: motion and rest. He breaks down the verb into its three components of the verb in the abstract, its subject, and its sphere of activity, in this case motion, the mover, and the space within which motion occurs.

The concept of "movement" is dissected and scrutinized to demonstrate that the three categories of the verb, its subject, and its sphere are all untenable. There is indisputably a perception of action, but this perception cannot be explained in a way that withstands logical inspection. First, a span of time is necessary for activity to take place. Activity, of any kind, requires a process of changing physical position or changing attributes. This change requires a temporal extension, for an instantaneous change would be tantamount to the complete disappearance of one thing and the appearance in its place of a wholly new thing. Nagarjuna first points out that to speak of motion in the present requires isolating the present moment. Movementin the past or in the future obviously does not constitute present moving; neither the "has moved" nor the "will move" is presently moving. When, though, did the motion of the presently-moving object commence? Prior to its commencement it was the "will move," but a "will move" is not moving. "How could there be a movement in the not [yet] moved?" he asks.[1] Likewise, movement is not initiated in the "has moved," for the "has moved," by definition, is not partaking of present movement. Further, movement does not commence in the "presently moving," for this is already moving — an action cannot begin anew in a place where it is already present. The exact commencement of motion can never be perceived, for, no matter how infinitesimally small the atomistic division of time, there will always be one point at which the object is not yet moving. "When the commencement of movement is not being perceived in any way, what is it that is discriminated as the moved, the present moving, or the not [yet] moved?"[2] Thus movement can only be perceived in the present moment, and the activity's necessary time span is lost. With the loss of temporal extension, the verbal activity becomes unfathomable, and hence unreal.

Even assuming that one could still speak of motion even when con-

---

[1]karika II.13

[2]karika II.14

fined to a single present moment only, one now has the problem of what moves. By definition, only a mover can partake of movement. Likewise, separated from a mover, there can be no such thing as movement in the abstract. The relation between these two, the moverand the fact of its movement, is logically meaningless. To say that a mover moves is redundant and superfluous. To say that a non-mover moves is to state a contradiction. But these are the only two options, for, "other than a mover and a non-mover, what third party moves?"[1] It may sound reasonable to say that it is a mover who partakes of movement. But it is not appropriate to speak of a mover without movement for, if it does not move, then by what is it a mover? Either option creates a disjunction between the subject and its actionthat is unacceptable.

The subject of motion is only half the story. One must further examine the lack of motion, or rest. The problems encountered by the issue of rest are identical as those faced by motion: a mover is not stationary, for this is a contradiction, a non-mover is not stationary, for this is a needless tautology, and there is no third party that is stationary. Further, a movercannot come to rest, for it would then cease to be a mover. If a mover were to become a "rester," then its identity would change and it would no longer be the same subject; there would be the dissolution of the moving object and the instant creation of the stationary object.

The obvious objection to the above arguments is to say that they assume an untenable identity of a mover and its movement. This identity should be replaced with a concept of difference, the opposition could declare: the mover is not the same as its movement, but merely possesses movement. If this were so, though, then movement would exist in the abstract and be independent of the mover. There would be motion but nothing moving. Another problem of isolating the subject from its movement is that this subject is not perceived in any way. This subject devoid of attributes, what Western philosophy calls the "bare particular," would be a metaphysical creation produced purely by the imagination, for it could never be experienced. Nagarjuna closes this section with the summary statement that neither motion, nor the mover, nor the space moved in is evident.[2] He has up to this point not offered an explicit discussion of the spatial dimension, but he states that the reality of space is to be negated in the same way that motionand rest were.

The reader is at this point likely to be left with the thought that Nagarjuna was a rampaging nihilist. All concepts are being summarily denied for some obscure and perverse purpose. Admittedly, this is a conclu-

[1]karika II.8

[2]karika II.25

sion that has occasionally been drawn by admirers and detractors alike, both ancient and modern. However, while it is not yet clear what Nagarjuna's intent is, it is likely not one so simple. He appears to be negating, not the reality of subject and object and their attributes, but rather just some way of thinking about them. Regarding the topic of this section, he wrote "The view that movement is identical with the mover is not proper. The view that the mover is different from motionis also not proper."[1] It remains to be seen, though, what view is proper.

4.3.3. Sections 3 through 6 — Factors of Personal Existence: Elements and Passions

Nagarjuna moves from these foundational examinations to an analysis of each of the specific categories delineated by the Abhidharma: the spheres of sense (ayatanas), the factors comprising the individual (skandhas), and the physical elements dharmas). He begins with an examination of the sense faculty of the eye, its function, and its object. He uses seeing as a paradigm for all of the senses, because an examination of one sense faculty is sufficient to explain the function of all of the senses.[2]

The theory of perception explained in section three of the karika, "Examination of the Faculty of the Eye," is nothing more than a restatement of the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. On the one side are the six sense faculties, and on the other are their six objective spheres. When these two come together, sensory perception arises. (The mind is considered the sixth organ of sense. It is not to be confused with consciousness, which infuses all six faculties, not just the mental.) There was little controversy about the senses themselves,[3] so what likely inspired this section was a debate regarding the specific functioning of the faculties. Hindu philosophy posited two distinct elements necessary for seeing: the seeing of the object, and the abstract noun "seeing."[4] This is analogous to the above-mentioned debate over motion, in which there was a tendency to isolate and make abstract the process of "movement" as separate from the actual instance of moving. There was also a disagreement regarding the functioning of the senses within Buddhism. The older Theravada tradition held that the sensory objects exist outside of and indepen-

---

[1]karika II.18

[2]More than this, the faculty of vision was paramount in Indian philosophy. Truths were seen as being self- evident, so much so that the term for a system of thought was darsana, "sight." The Buddha also emphasized the unique significance of sight by telling his followers, not to "believe" him, but to "come and see [for yourself]." Cf. Rahula, 8-9

[3]Kalupahana 1992, 164

[4]ibid., 164

dent of the act of perception. This may not necessarily violate dependent arising, for the sensory object consists only of infinitesimal and momentary atoms and the functioning of the faculty of perception is required to impose order on the atoms and create a perception.[1] While this theory may not be wrong per se, Nagarjuna was still uncomfortable with the substantialism it implied. To clarify exactly what dependent arising says about the function of perception, he used an illustration: perceptions depend on their physical objective sphere "just as the birth of a son is said to be dependent upon the mother and the father."[2] That is, perception is wholly dependent upon the object perceived for its functioning. Perception as an independent process or entity cannot exist in the abstract, separate from the object perceived.

The other aspect of perception that he felt compelled to examine, after perception and the perceived, was the subject perceiver. Again, the immediately obvious alternative to the Buddha's teaching was the Hindu. The Upanisads asserted an unchanging and eternal agent perceiver, and declared that this eternal soul is the ultimate object of all perceptions. The truest and most primal perception is that of the atman, the soul, being aware of itself. This concept is surely what Nagarjuna had in mind in the second verse of this section when he says that "seeing does not perceive itself, its own form." There must be two separate elements for seeing to arise: the seer and the seen. Yet on the other hand, seeing must in some way perceive itself, for "how can that which does not see itself see others?"[3] A further confusion lies in the seer's relation to his or her seeing. Like the mover and movement, "a seer does not exist either separated or not separated from seeing."[4] If the seer exists separate from the action of seeing, then there will be some point at which the seer is not presently seeing, and thus is not yet a "seer." If they are not separated, then there is no one engaging in the activity of seeing, but rather one whose nature it is always to see. This theory can perhaps be asserted metaphysically, but it is never experienced in fact. The way to disentangle the paradox is by not positing either a strict bifurcation between seer and seen, which would preclude their possibility of interacting, or an identity between the two, which would obviate perception as a faculty. The proper description of the relation between the two, i.e. dependent arising, is yet to be explained.

Section four, "Examination of the Aggregates," discusses the Bud-

---

[1] Hiriyanna, 204

[2] karika III.7

[3] karika III.2

[4] karika III.6

dha's insight into the transitoriness of all phenomena. He saw that impermanency requires that there be no permanent entities. Conversely, if there are permanent entities, then these can never be phenomenal, and thus are pure abstractions that are too metaphysical to have any relevance. The apparent permanence of the noumenal individual was explained as a mere contiguity of phenomenal elements. The Buddha analyzed these units of phenomena into two categories: the aggregates of factors that constitute the apparent personality, the skandhas, and the physical elements comprising these aggregates, the dhatus. These two categories, along with the spheres of sense, comprised the base constituents of reality as analyzed and classified by the Abhidharma. Having discussed the senses, Nagarjuna now devotes two sections to an examination of the remaining two categories.

Reacting to the schools that asserted a transcendent and immanent soul, the Buddha analyzed the psychophysical personality into five aggregates to show that there was no permanent soul in the individual and then to explain what does comprise the individual. On the opposite end of the spectrum, he reacted to the materialist theory that it is only matter which is eternal by analyzing the physical elements themselves and exposing their transience. There was no debate within Buddhism about the validity of these theories; the skandhas and the dhatus were accepted by all. However, it appears that there was a tendency to read more into these theories than the Buddha intended. The "Realists" posited some form of a self-nature that resided in the elements, and the "Personalists" asserted that there was some form of a self-hood that transcended but was neither identical with nor different from its component aggregates.

Nagarjuna chose to approach these heretical theories in this section by demonstrating first that it is not possible to think of the aggregates as real. The aggregates into which the Buddha analyzed the individual were material form (the body), sense-contacts, perceptions, psychological tendencies (the characteristics that most evidently distinguish one personality from another), and consciousness. These could be reified by positing a base foundation for each. For example, the foundation for material form would be the elements of earth, air, fire, water, and space, and the foundation of sense-contact, or feeling, would be pleasure, pain, gladness, sadness, or indifference.[1] Such a reification, Nagarjuna argued, requires an untenable division between the foundations of an aggregate and the aggregate itself. Any attempt to relate an aggregate and its foundation dissolves into nonsense in exactly the same way that a mover and its movementcannot be related. Consider, for example, feeling and one of

[1]Kalupahana 1992, 146

its constituents, pleasure. Are they two different things? If so, then they will exist independently, and will lose their dialectic identity. The various perceptions and sensations will not be a foundational constituent for the human category of feeling if feeling is not contingent upon them, and vice versa. Then are they identical? If so, the division between an aggregate and its foundation would become meaningless, for they would then be one and the same. Feeling would be both pleasure and pain always and at the same time. The only relation they could have is one of complete dependence, which is exactly what the Buddha taught. Neither the aggregates nor that which comprises them have any existence on their own: in this example, pleasure does not exist until it is felt, and feeling has no function until there is pleasure.[1]

Section five, "Examination of the Physical Elements," is along similar lines. The Buddha spoke of the elements as each having a specific characteristic, e.g. the nature of earth is hardness and the nature of water is fluidity. However, cautions Nagarjuna, this distinction between an element and its characteristic cannot be pressed too far. If the characterized, e.g. earth, exists separately from its characteristic, e.g. hardness, then one is left with two independent and meaningless abstractions: a piece of earth that is not yet associated with hardness, and a piece of hardness that exists only in the potential. "An existent that is without characteristics is nowhere evident," he said. Furthermore, "in the absence of the [existent], there is no occurrence of the characteristic."[2] The relation of elements and their qualities, if scrutinized closely enough in this manner, produces a rather startling conclusion: "There is neither an existent nor a non- existent, neither the characterized nor the characteristic," nor even any of the elements comprising physical existence![3] A statement such as this obviously is subject to many and diverse interpretations, such as the five summarized above.[4]

Nagarjuna devotes section six to an "Examination of Lust and the Lustful One." The word used here for "lust," raga, can mean any general feeling of passion or strong interest.[5] (To express their broad meanings,

---

[1]It may be noted that the paradigm offered by the Buddha is wholly antithetical to that of Platonism: the Platonic "theory of Forms" represents an epitome of the worldview Nagarjuna was rejecting. It seems that Nagarjuna's only grievance about the theory of the aggregates was the tendency to seek a substantial reality underlying each aggregate. While the systematization of the categories produced by the Abhidharma was not necessarily wrong, Nagarjuna wanted to ensure that no excessive metaphysical theorizing resulted from it.

[2]karika V.2 and V.4, respectively

[3]karika V.7

[4]The reader is reminded that the word "is" in "there is neither an existent nor a non-existent" is problematic in English translation only. The original reads na bhavo nabhavo, literally "neither existent nor non-existent."

[5]Monier-Williams, 872

lust and its opposite, hate, will often be translated here as "passionate attraction and aversion.") His purpose here is to show that, like movement and the one who moves, lust and the one who is lustful are interdependent and cannot be ontologically distinguished. There is no such thing as a subject who is a tabula rasa, who is not presently lustful but who either was or will be, for then in what abstract realm could the unmanifest lust possibly exist? Further, neither can lust and the lustful one be one and the same, for then there would be no such thing as the noun "lust" — there would only be one entity, the lustful one, and speaking of two different things would be a superfluity.

There are two possible significances of this section. The one favored by translator David Kalupahana is that Nagarjuna was here addressing one of the issues that the Buddha said was chiefly to blame in committing the individual to bondage. Greed, hatred, and lust are all instances of the thirst tanha) that binds the individual to the cycle of unpleasant birth-and-death, especially the misguided greed and lust for continued existence. [1] Freedom, nirvana, was defined as the absence of lust, and therefore, Kalupahana seems to say, Nagarjuna demonstrated the independent unreality of lust to facilitate escaping from it and realizing nirvana.[2]

A slightly different significance is hinted at by the placement of this section. It immediately follows an examination of the components of reality and the individual, i.e. the physical elements (dhatus) and the constituent aggregates of the psychophysical individual (skandhas). Nagarjuna has already examined two of the five aggregates, perception in section three and material form in section four. The fourth constituent aggregate of the individual is samskara, mental formations and dispositions. These dispositions include any volitional activity or habitual tendency, good and bad, that creates karma and thus binds one to the cycle of birth-and-death. Dispositions include confidence and conceit, wisdom and ignorance, lust and hatred.[3] Since Nagarjuna examines one of these dispositions, lust, shortly after a discussion of the aggregates as a whole, it is likely that he is using lust as a paradigmatic example of all the dispositions. His intention then would be to demonstrate in yet another way that there is to be found no transcendent Self separate from its psychophysical constituents. That Nagarjuna intended this section to be more comprehensive than an examination of lust only is indicated by this section's concluding verse: "Thus, with or without the lustful one, there is no establishment of lust. Like lust, there is no establishment of

[1]Rahula, 29

[2]Kalupahana 1986, 40-41 and 153-4

[3]Rahula, 22

anything with or without [accompaniments]."[1] (italics mine) That is, all dispositional constituents of the individual are ultimately dependent. Any real existence of them is illusory, whether the individual exists or not.

4.3.4. Section 7 — Cohesion of Disparate Elements (Samskrta)

The basic elements necessary for the manifestation of the physical world, i.e. causal conditions (pratyayas), verbs, the factors of the perceiving individual, and the physical elements have now been briefly examined. It is now possible to examine the way the elements combine to make phenomena. Nagarjuna proceeds to do this in section seven, "The Examination of Composite Things."[2] The Buddha described all composite elements, i.e. all phenomena, as partaking of three characteristics: arising, enduring, and ceasing. Things come to be, remain for a time, and then go away. Nagarjuna accepts these three processes of existence, but cautions against hypostatizing any of them. If a thing were defined by either real arising, real enduring, or real ceasing, then there would be the oddity of the origination of a thing which has no duration or cessation, of something that endures but has no origination or decay, or of a thing that dies but which was never born.[3]

The obvious way out of the dilemma is to say that a thing merely can be described in terms of one of the three processes, rather than partaking of the nature of one of the three. This response may, at first, seem to be the proper one. For example, a phenomenon can be said to arise, but that does not mean that it partakes of a separate and real thing called "arising." If arising, enduring, and ceasing were real, then they would be discrete entities and thus "not adequate to function as characteristics of the composite [thing]."[4] The reason for this is that if they were real and discrete entities, then a phenomenon could obviously not partake of all three at the same time, which would mean that it would be arising at the same time that it was ceasing. Neither could it partake of one after the other, for this would imply that at the time of arising a thing was permanent, i.e. non-arisen, and then becomes temporary between the moments of arising and ceasing, and then suddenly shifts from a state of enduring to the process of decaying. One could never find the precise moment when, for example, endurance gives way to cessation. Infinite regress

[1]karika VI.10

[2]The word used here, samskrta, is usually translated as "conditioned." To avoid confusion with "conditions (pratyayas)," pratyaya, it will be clearer to translate samskrta as "composite." (cf. Monier-Williams, 1120)

[3]Murti 1960, 192

[4]karika VII.2

becomes unavoidable. Each of the three processes would itself have to arise, endure, even if only but for an instant, and then cease. "If arising were to produce this present arising, which arising would again produce that arising of that arising?" Nagarjuna wryly asks.[1] (This is the context of the "wonderfully cryptic" verse quoted on page 40, i.e. "The arising of arising is exclusively the arising of primary arising…" A further elucidation of this, though, would not be proper here. Cf. karika VII.4)

The ineluctable conclusion of a close examination of the three processes is that not one of them exists as real, and so the above response, though seemingly acceptable, also breaks down. "As an illusion, a dream, a [mythical city], so have arising, endurance, and destruction been exemplified." And, further, "with the non-establishment of arising, duration, and destruction, the composite [thing] does not exist."[2] That is, if the three phases of the process are negated, then the processed thing itself must be illusory. Therefore, even the notion that a thing can be described in terms of one of the three processes must fail, even if the processes themselves are not reified.

4.3.5. Sections 8-11 — The Ontological Status of the Individual

Having discussed the elements both singly and in combination, Nagarjuna briefly looks at the agent which appears to underlie or precede these phenomena. He does this with the next four sections, in which he first examines the nature of the agent and its action, then the preexistent self, then the relation between the self's existence and its temporal states, and finally the prior and posterior extremes of the self's existence.

There are two primary ways that philosophers have tended to approach the subject of the self: one empirical, the other speculative. The empirical approach is famously expressed by the Cartesian dictum "I think, therefore I am." Nagarjuna analyzes this approach with the example of "I act, therefore I am" in section eight, "Examination of Action and Actor." It could be said that the agent actor must exist, for it is apparent that activity exists. In section two Nagarjuna removed the substantial basis for activity and change, but it is not denied that both are still perceived by the ignorant and the enlightened alike. The crux is what is the proper way to regard, or believe in, this activity and change. It is not possible to say that there is a really existent agent who performs a really existent action. Real existence implies immutability, for if the entity's essence changed then it would no longer be the same entity. However, this im-

[1]karika VII.18.

[2]karika VII.33-34

mutability would require an impassable dichotomy between the ground of being and the sphere of activity. Neither is it possible to say that the agent who acts is in some abstract way "non-existent." If this were so, then change and activity would be effected without having been existentially caused. Despite the above problems, Nagarjuna does not deny the occurrence of activity. A flat denial of activity would undercut the entire foundation of the Buddha's teachings on morality and, by extension, the Noble Path leading to enlightenment would be lost.[1] The proper relation between agent and actionis once again nothing more than dependent arising, for neither of the two can have either a real or an unreal status. "We do not perceive any other way of establishing [them]," he concludes.[2]

The speculative approach to establishing the reality of the agent is logical induction. Nagarjuna examines and refutes this approach in the next section, "Examination of the Prior [Entity]." If there is the fact of perception, then there is the entity of a perceiver, this approach would hold. "Therefore, it is determined that, prior to [perceptions], such an existent is," asserts the opponent.[3] This could be expressed by slightly rephrasing the Cartesian dictum to "How could I think were there not a thinker?" The immediate problem with this is that such a "prior subject" could be nothing more than a speculative abstraction. If the subject is said to exist prior to perception, then "by what means is it made known?" [4] There is no way to be aware of or even to posit the existence of a subject prior to and thus intrinsically devoid of its characteristic functioning. Further, if such a prior entity were posited, then perceptions would exist independent of the perceiver, which is absurd. The analysis of perception undertaken above in section three of the karika focused on the impossibility of independence specifically of perceiver and perceiving. This section, though, is slightly different in scope — it analyzes the impossibility of the subject's existence independent of any of its experiences by virtue of existing prior to them. The consequence of this is broad. "Someone prior to, simultaneous with, or posterior to [perception] is not evident," and therefore neither are the experiences themselves evident. The upshot is that "thoughts of existence and non-existence are also renounced."[5]

Section ten is, prima facie, an examination of one dualism: fire and the fuel which it burns. Actually, though, Nagarjuna was using this example to discuss from yet another angle the issue of the essence and

[1]karika VIII.5

[2]karika VIII.12

[3]karika IX.1-2

[4]karika IX.3

[5]karika IX.11-12

temporal manifestation of the self. One school of Personalism asserted that there is a person who is neither identical with nor different from its constituent aggregates, skandhas. Adherents of this school used the metaphor of fire and fuel to explain their position. Fire is not identical to its fuel, for then that which is burned would be the same as the process of burning. Nor is fire different from fuel, for then they could not be explained in the same terms; for example, that which is burning would not be hot.[1] Notwithstanding the fact that the individual cannot be explained ontologically, the Personalists held, it was still necessary to assert its reality, for otherwise karma could not appertain and rebirth would not occur. [2] It was this doctrine which Nagarjuna criticized through his analysis of fire and fuel.

Nagarjuna agrees that fire and fuel cannot be identical, for then there would be only one entity, and he agrees that they cannot be separate, for then there could be heat and flame but nothing burning. While the Personalists were maintaining that fire and fuel were neither identical nor different, they were still admitting the reality of both. Their agenda would then have been to deconstruct the ontological independence of the two for the sake of arriving at a higher synthesis midway between the two halves of the dualism.[3] It is difficult to explain what Nagarjuna's position is in this section, for he seems to say two different things. One verse especially makes it unclear what exactly Nagarjuna's stance on the identity /difference was. "If fire is different from fuel it would reach the fuel, just as a woman would reach for a man and a man for a woman," he says.[4] He follows this with a statement that fire and fuel could reach for each other in the same way as do the man and the woman "only if fire and fuel were to exist mutually separated."[5] On the one hand, he denied difference in the first verse of this section by pointing out that if they are different then each would exist on its own, an absurd conclusion. On the other, the fact that woman and man interact is empirically validated and indisputable. One interpretation of this disparity is based on the fact that there are numerous instances in the Mulamadhyamakakarika in which Nagarjuna quotes an opponent's position and refutes it in the next verse. Some commentators have interpreted the first verse of these two as the opponent's wrong view, followed by Nagarjuna's assertion of the correct view.[1] This interpretation would have Nagarjuna say that, while fire and

[1]Lamotte, 608

[2]Kohn, 243

[3]Kalupahana 1986, 197

[4]karika X.6

[5]karika X.7

fuel are not the same, they are not really different, either. Man and woman, though, are non-dependent and hence different.

Another interpretation does not disagree with the above, but lends it a slightly different character. One could interpret both verses as Nagarjuna's, from which it would follow that he is recognizing there to be different types of complementary relationships. While on the one hand fire and fuel are mutually dependent for their very definition, on the other the human genders are observed to be complementary but separate. This would declare there to exist dualisms the individual elements of which are dependently arisen, not contingent on the other half of the pair, but merely contingent upon internal factors. The perception and conceptual differentiation of each half of the duality would of course be dependent on the other half — one could not define "woman" without defining "man" — but the ontic status of the entity would not be dependent on the other half. While it is not certain which of the above two interpretations is the better, an example Nagarjuna used in section six, i.e. that of lust and the lustful one, may provide a clue. There, he made it clear that, though lust and the lustful one are differentiable, neither can exist without the other. Not only are their identities mutually contingent, but further they cannot be found in separate temporal or spatial locations. Likewise, fire and fuel are ultimately inseparable. Man and woman, though, are obviously separate. If nothing else, the two genders can be seen to exist when in separate spatial locations, when not "reaching for" each other. Nagarjuna is thus demonstrating that complementary relationships can take different forms, which relationships allow varying degrees of independence of each half of the pair.

Section eleven, "Examination of the Prior and Posterior Extremities," is devoted to an address of one last element of the belief in the soul, namely the eternalism it implies. The Buddha spurned discussions of etiology and teleology both because the only important things to worry about are those in the present, and also because ultimate beginnings and ends can only be speculative. Nagarjuna here examines the meaning and relevance of the latter, the ultimate prior and posterior ends. The Buddha clearly stated that the ultimate ends of the universe are not evident and hence inconceivable.[2] Furthermore, it is not even appropriate to speak of the ultimate ends of an individual life-span, for they cannot be "real."

---

[1]Cf. the translation of the karika verses X.8-9 in Frederick Streng, Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967). (It has been claimed that this translation is not by Streng, as claimed, but by J. A. B. van Buitenen. Cf. Kees W. Bolle, review of A History of Buddhist Philosophy, by David J. Kalupahana, in Journal of Oriental Studies (1994, page number unknown). However, since it is Streng's name only listed in Emptiness and cross-references are to Streng, this translation will be referred to here as his.)

[2]Kalupahana 1986, 206

If birth were real, then three undesirable options would arise. If birth preceded the entity of death, then there would be a birth without old age and death, and all arisen things would be immortal. If death is inherent in birth, then something will be dying at the same moment it is being born. Finally, if it is flatly stated that birth and death are separate, then no born things will die and the things that die will never have been born. The only correct way to view birth-and-death is that, if something is born, then it will die. This is not merely a slightly different way to phrase the relationship between the two, but rather a whole different way of viewing the nature of birth and death: they do not exist on their own, and therefore one can in no way speak of origins or ends. Of effect and cause, characterized and characteristic, "of the entire life process as well as of all existents, the prior [and posterior] ends [are] not evident."[1]

4.3.6. Sections 12-13 — Suffering and its Cause

Nagarjuna has now analyzed almost all of the elements into which the Abhidharma subdivided reality. Only one percept has not yet been mentioned. This is duhkha, the all-encompassing universal suffering. The Buddha spoke of "three marks of existence": impermanence, soullessness, and suffering. Impermanence and soullessness are descriptions of the ontological status of phenomena, and suffering is the consequence of these for the individual. The next two sections of the karika discuss, first, the nature and origin of suffering itself and second, the dispositions which cause all phenomena to be experienced as suffering.

Buddhism does not see duhkha as just a regrettable fact of life that must be accepted. This would be simple pessimism. Since Buddhism is preeminently a soteriology, the fact of suffering is exploited to spur the unhappy individual on to the proper goal of nirvana.[2] The Buddha was very clear that one must have a proper understanding of suffering and its origin if one is to utilize this understanding and ultimately escape from suffering. Nagarjuna examined all the possibilities of the cause of suffering, namely self-causation, other-causation, both, or neither, and found that none were tenable. The result of considering suffering to be self-caused would be that one person acts in a way that causes suffering, and then this same person experiences the suffering. This would mean that the same person existed in at least two separate moments, which would lead to the belief in eternalism. If suffering is considered to be caused

[1] karika XI.7-8. (The addendum "[and posterior]" is mine. It was left out of the sentence most likely only to preserve the meter, so its inclusion is justified.)

[2] Santina, 31-33

by another, then there would not be a firm connection between an act and its consequences. This could lead to a denial of moral responsibility. A further objection to both of the above is that any distinction between the agent and the suffering caused by the agent's act would allow for there to be a person existing separate from suffering. Who is this person who can exist unsullied by duhkha? asks Nagarjuna.[1] Finally, if caused by both, then the above difficulties are just compounded, and if caused by neither, then it would be deterministic and nirvana forever unattainable. When a disciple asked the Buddha if suffering is self-caused or is caused by another, the Buddha did not answer "yes" or "no" to either question. He merely remarked, in answer to each, "one should not put it that way."[2] To preclude the false and harmful beliefs mentioned above, the fact of suffering was neither explained nor explained away. The only important thing is its eradication, which is indirectly the subject of the next section.

Nagarjuna examined briefly in section six the nature of passions like lust and hatred, or passionate attraction and aversion, and demonstrated that they are dependent upon the one who grasps. This proves that the constraining passions are ultimately illusory and can have no real claim on the one who understands them. An understanding of this dependence paves the way for the possibility of freeing oneself from the passions and discovering nirvana. He examines the nature of dispositions once again in section thirteen, "Examination of Dispositions," but with a different emphasis. Whereas in the earlier section he focused on the dependence of the dispositions on the subject, here he explains in greater detail why the dispositions can have no independent reality.[3]

This section, at eight verses in length, is one of the shortest in the karika. However, it is one of the most important examinations of the entire treatise. The dispositions have a unique place in the Buddha's ontology, for they hold a very influential place in his two formulations of reality, i.e. dependent arising and the aggregates of personal existence skandhas). As the second link in the chain of dependent arising, dispositions are that which, conditioned by ignorance, bring the world into existence. In the five categories comprising the individual, dispositions both shape

---

[1]karika XII.4,6

[2]Kalupahana 1986, 45

[3]The importance of this section is hinted at by the difficulty the Buddhist tradition has had in naming it. Most interpreters have entitled it "Samskara-pariksa," the analysis of "Dispositions" (Kalupahana) or "Conditioned Elements" (Streng), even though the term samskara appears in the chapter only once. The Tibetan texts gave it the title "Tattva-pariksa," analysis of "Truth," though the term tattva does not appear in the chapter once. Sprung's title of "The Absence of Being in Things" may be the most accurate, for the terms "sunya" or "sunyata" appear in half the verses. However, since this debate is too involved for the context at hand, Kalupahana's translation is accepted here.

the personality and condition rebirth.

In placing this discussion immediately after the one of suffering, Nagarjuna apparently had in mind the Buddha's "three marks of existence," impermanence, suffering, and soullessness. The Buddha's exact wording here is important. He did not indiscriminately ascribe these marks to all aspects of existence. Specifically, he said "All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are suffering. All phenomena are soulless."[1] An implication of this is, not that conditioned things are not soulless, but that not all phenomena are suffering.[2] If the Buddha were to have said that all phenomena are suffering, he would have been promoting an unreserved pessimism, for there is no escaping phenomena while alive. By saying that all conditioned things are suffering, he was showing a way to escape from suffering while in this life. A person may be a part of the phenomenal world but not regard it in a way that creates suffering, i.e. not seek reality in conditioned things. One needs only an understanding of this unreal nature of things, which will allow one to give up the grasping thirst for existence and the passions inspired by experience. This, in turn, will pacify the dispositions, and most suffering will be avoided.[3] The cause of all of this self-entrapment is a lack of proper understanding. "The dispositions depend on ignorance," the Buddha said, and "the entire mass of suffering thus comes into existence."[4] The key that Nagarjuna holds to all of this is that he can clarify the nature of the passions and dispositions, which will help to dispel the ignorance which causes duhkha.

The aggregate of dispositions is of crucial importance, for it is this aggregate which, more than any of the other four, flavors the character of the whole bundle. In terms of the human individual, dispositions are most directly responsible for giving shape and uniqueness to the personality. The importance of this aggregate and the frequency of Nagarjuna's reference to it warrants further elucidation of its nature. The first three aggregates provide for the material world, sensations of it, and the resultant cognizing of sensation called perception. For example, the first aggregate may be an object, the second aggregate senses the light reflecting from the object and reports the frequency of the light, and the third aggregate

---

[1]Kalupahana 1986, 218

[2]Neither may this be interpreted to mean that phenomenal things are permanent. Admittedly, this is confusing. Likely the Buddha just used the formulation that "all phenomena are soulless" to be more comprehensive — had he said "all conditioned things are soulless," one would not be prevented from erroneously seeking a soul residing outside of the conditioned things. cf. Rahula, 57-58.

[3]Etymology provides an intriguing coincidence: the root of the English word "passion" is the Latin pati, "to suffer."

[4]Ramana, 111

identifies that frequency as "blue." The fourth aggregate is a mix of attitudes, habits, emotions, passions, and thoughts which cause the person to react to this perception, e.g. "I like blue."

This is also the place where, if one is not careful, such preferences and attitudes can lead to grasping. These dispositions are what turn an otherwise passive receiver of perceptions into a conceptualizing and acting individual. These four all provide first an awareness of the external world and then reactions to it. The fifth and final aggregate, consciousness, is not a sort of higher result arising from the first four, for the internal mental life is found in the fourth aggregate. Rather, consciousness is a term for the all-pervading awareness which makes possible sensations, perceptions, and dispositions.

A quote from the philosopher William James, while written in reference to a different tradition, is nonetheless one of the clearest and most cogent expressions of the function and importance of the dispositions this author has yet found.

"Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have any importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective."[1]

The dispositions are thus vital if the person is to act in and react to the world, and action and reaction are themselves vital if one is to follow the Eightfold Path. On the other hand, the dispositions can also be the chief cause of grasping and will bind one to the cycle of suffering if one is not careful. It is dispositions which constitute preferences, but it is these preferences which can easily become passionate attractions and aversions. As Kalupahana puts it, "we are, therefore, in a double-bind." We need the dispositions in order to live, but they can also contribute most to our suffering.[2] The key is to use dispositional preferences without being used by them. Nagarjuna's section here offers explanations and guidance about how one is to do this.

To help to pacify, or break free from the clutch of the dispositions, Nagarjuna introduces here his famous concept of emptiness, sunyata.[1]

[1] William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), 147 (italics in original)

[2] Kalupahana 1986, 48

First, he repeats his negation of the possibility of real change. “Neither change of something in itself nor of something different is proper. The youth does not age nor does an aged person age.”[2] An entity cannot both have a real identity and experience a change. If, in the example, the person were youthful, then he or she would partake of no agedness and thus could not remain a youth and still age. If the person were aged, then it would be ludicrous to say that he or she ages. This would be tantamount to saying, for example, that a red thing turns red: real change would not have occurred. The solution is to say that all existent things have no self-nature, svabhava. Substances do not have attributes — they are “empty.” Nagarjuna seems to feel that removing the possibility of holding false beliefs is the best way to preclude dispositional grasping and the suffering concomitant with it. If one understands that all things are empty, then ignorance will be removed, the dispositions will lose their foundation, and “the entire mass of suffering” will go out of existence.

4.3.7. Sections 14-15 — Identity / Difference: Self-nature vs. Association of Distinct Elements

Nagarjuna has devoted the majority of the first thirteen sections to examinations of each of the elements into which the Abhidharma classified reality and some of the causal and dependence relations between these elements. The problems he has with most of these elements boil down to the fact that they cannot be considered in isolation. When any element is seen as being in some way independent, logical paradoxes result. In section fifteen he addresses the root cause of these problematic theories, which problem is the assertion of self-nature, svabhava. Before tackling this pivotal issue, though, there was one last point he wanted to clarify.

Nagarjuna has amply demonstrated that one cannot conceive of things in isolation, because the identity which makes each a separate and distinguishable “thing” depends wholly on its relation to other things. What he has not addressed as fully as he would like is the relation itself. This he does in section fourteen, “Examination of Association.” If one asserts that phenomena consist of separate yet interacting elements, then one is left with the problem of how these elements combine, or associate, to produce the phenomena. There is no way for atomistic and fully independent things to associate, for a truly independent thing is non-contingent, incapable of being influenced, and thus not subject to association.

---

[1]Emptiness was first mentioned at the end of his fourth section. In that context, however, it was mentioned for a different reason and may have even had a different meaning. Cf. pp. 148f.

[2]karika XIII.5

Further, if things are distinguishable, then their identity can be defined in isolation. Yet the concept of difference requires dependence. "Different things are dependent upon different things," Nagarjuna says.[1] To say that things are different is to say that they are separate. But, "without a second different thing, one different thing can not exist as a different thing." [2] Since any attempt to differentiate elements or phenomena reduces to absurdity, there can be no such thing as association of these elements. "Neither the associating nor the associated nor even the agent of association is evident."[3] The English language affords an analogy here. The etymology of both "distinguish" and "distinction" is the Latin distinguere, "to separate." As reality is ultimately whole, by whatever definition, separations have only phenomenal validity. The consequence of this is that there can be no way to declare a phenomenon to be composed of separate but combined elements.

One of the aspects of the Buddha's teachings about which the Buddha was most adamant is also one that proved to be the most unpalatable both to subsequent Buddhists and to non-Buddhists alike. This is the assertion that there is no real soul to be found in the universe. The Buddha was very explicit regarding the doctrine of soullessness:

"Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its elements are lacking in an ego (atman).[4] (Whether "self-nature" is also a synonym is precisely the point Nagarjuna discusses.) This fact a Buddha discovers and masters… and announces, teaches, publishes, proclaims, discloses, minutely explains and makes clear, that all the elements of being are lacking in an ego."[5]

Notwithstanding, the tendency to believe in the soul seems to have been almost ineradicable, for it arose again and again in a variety of forms. The Theravada, for example, saw every element as being a real entity with a self-nature, svabhava.[6] While not exactly a form of atman, self-nature was nonetheless not so very different. Even more radical,

---

[1]karika XIV.5

[2]karika XIV.7, trans. Streng (italics mine)

[3]karika XIV.8

[4]Following Freud, there is a tendency to differentiate between the "ego" and the "soul," the ego being the personality and the soul being the animating principle. Relating these varying shades of meaning to the Buddha's skandha-theory would be fascinating, but beyond the scope of this paper. The terms "ego," "self," "soul," and "atman" will be used interchangeably here.

[5]Anguttara-nikaya- sutta, quoted in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles H. Moore, eds., A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 274

[6]Lamotte, 602

certain of the Abhidharma commentaries explicitly defined an element in terms of its self-nature, declaring that it is precisely this permanent factor which gives an element its distinguishing identity.[1]

Self-nature was the great bugaboo of metaphysical speculation, Nagarjuna felt, for it was the assertion of self- nature that made incomprehensible the relations between substance and attribute, subject and object, identity and difference. Thus, the "Examination of Self-nature," though short, is of supreme importance. While svabhava and atman are not exactly the same thing, as theories they faced the same problems. Self-nature, for Nagarjuna, had to be seen as a permanent and substantial identity for, if it were only temporarily the identity of a thing, then it would not truly be that thing's identity. However, this self-nature would have to be uncreated, neither caused nor dependent upon causal conditions (pratyayas). "How could there be a self- nature that is made?" he asks.[2] That is, if it were not uncreated then it would be artificial, and an artificial substance is inconsistent with the very definition of substance.[3] If there is no self- nature, then neither can there be its dialectical component, other-nature (parabhava), Nagarjuna continues, and thus conceptions based on difference and relation would be nullified.

Another significant corollary of svabhava is that it negates the very possibility of existence itself. This can be illuminated by etymology. Sva - bhava literally means "self - existence," and para - bhava literally means "other - existence." Without sva - bhava and para - bhava, Nagarjuna says, whence can there be existence itself, bhava? The reason for this is that existence, bhava, "is established only when there is svabhava or parabhava."[4] Further, "when the existent is not established, the non-existent is also not established," for the non-existent is nothing more than the change of the existent.[5]

The issue that Nagarjuna is addressing so doggedly is not simply metaphysical eristics. The consequences for Buddhism are profound, for "those who perceive self-nature as well as other- nature, existence as well as non-existence, they do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha's message."[6] The Buddha explicitly denied both extremes because, as a belief system, each was injurious for the individual seeking a release from suffering. To say that something exists or has self-nature

[1]Warder, 323

[2]karika XV.2

[3]Kalupahana 1992, 165

[4]karika XV.4

[5]karika XV. 5

[6]karika XV.6

"implies grasping after eternalism." To say that something does not exist now but once did, or exists now but will not always exist, "implies the philosophy of annihilationism." Therefore, "a discerning person should not rely upon either existence or non-existence."[1] These two extremes are each deleterious to the moral life: annihilationism because it undercuts responsibility, and eternalism because a firm belief in the self leads to a preoccupation with pleasure.[2]

4.3.8. Sections 16-17 — Bondage and its Cause

The overarching purpose of Indian philosophy is the attainment of freedom. "Salvation" in Western thought tends to mean "the acquisition of holiness" which is provided by God.[3] Salvation is the deliverance from evil and the bestowal of eternal life. "Freedom" for the Indian mind, however, is a little different. It is a release from delusion and suffering which, while perhaps assisted through God's guidance, is nonetheless wholly self-attained.[4] That which caused the individual to be bound to the phenomenal world is, ultimately, ignorance. The lack of spiritual understanding (jnana) leads to volitional action, or karma, and the "fruits" of such action. These two elements, the action and its result, constitute the law of universal cause-and-effect. In order to attain liberation from the unpleasant cycle of birth-and-death, the Buddha taught, one must disassociate oneself from volitional action. This is done, not by refraining from volitional action, which would not be possible, but by refraining from believing that there is a real self which does real acts. The insight that there is no self is the antidote for ignorance. This understanding allows one to abandon the dispositions, graspings, and passions which caused one to be bound to the karmic cycle of birth- and-death in the first place. Nagarjuna now examines these two interrelated concepts, bondage and its cause, karma.

All of the major Indian religious systems — Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism — accepted the reality of karma and its corollary, rebirth.[5] All acts were necessarily followed by their fruits. If the fruit of an act had not as yet become manifest by the time of the individual's death, then that individual would be forced to return to existence in another life, again and

[1]karika XV.10-11

[2]Lamotte, 50

[3]Cf. Ninian Smart, The Philosophy of Religion (New York: Random House, 1970), 104

[4]T.R.V. Murti, "The Individual in Indian Religious Thought," in Charles A. Moore, ed., The Indian Mind (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 328

[5]Charles A. Moore, "The Comprehensive Indian Mind," in ibid., 13

again, until the fruits of all actions had materialized.[1] There have been, quite literally, as many interpretations of karma as there were schools of Indian philosophy. This is technically referred to as transmigration. The obvious difficulty that the Buddhist faced was in reconciling the fact of bondage and its conjunct, transmigration, with the Buddha's teaching that there is no self. This is the problem that is Nagarjuna's major concern in section sixteen, "Examination of Bondage and Release." "It may be assumed that a person transmigrates," he agrees. Yet, he has demonstrated in the previous sections that there is no person-hood, no self, to be found in any of the elements of existence. "Who then will transmigrate?"[2]

The dilemma is, once again, found to be caused by a "Personalist" misunderstanding of the theory of the aggregates (skandhas). The dispositions, as the primary embodiment of the forces of grasping and greedy passions, are also the chief forces causing rebirth. The erroneous tendency was to posit a substantial self-nature in these dispositions. The popular belief, Nagarjuna explains, was that only a real entity with real soul can be bound to phenomenal existence and transmigrate. This, however, is not possible; as explained above, there can be no self- nature in the dispositions. If there were an entity with a permanent nature, then it could not transmigrate. Transmigration, Kalupahana points out, "implies moving from one position to another, disappearing in one place and appearing in another."[3] The notion of permanence holds that an entity is always present, and so there is no question of its ceasing and arising. Neither can an entity without an enduring self-nature transmigrate, for, if the entity is truly temporary, then it will completely cease, and no discussion of its continuance, either from one moment to the next or from one life to the next, is appropriate. This method of analysis, Nagarjuna says, applies not just to one factor of the individual, but to the sentient being as a whole. It cannot transmigrate whether it has or does not have a self-nature, and therefore it can experience neither bondage nor release from bondage. If one thinks in terms of self- nature, then the inevitable conclusion is that "a sentient being, like [dispositions], is neither bound nor released."[4]

Nagarjuna does not explicitly state in this section what is the proper way to view the individual, its state of bondage, and the nature of release. It is to be understood, though, and it will become clearer later, that the way out of the impasse is to forego thoughts of substantialism. The Bud-

---

[1] One must not be left with the impression that the systems were in agreement on the nature and function of karmic volition.

[2] karika XVI.2

[3] Kalupahana 1986, 54

[4] karika XVI.5

dha's theory of the aggregates, as explained above, manages to explain both what constitutes the belief in an individual and how that belief could come to be without ever saying that there actually is a real individual. Bondage and freedom are to be understood in the same way: the factors that constitute the individual arise interdependently and continuity consists, not in direct causation, but in causal influence. This chain of arising is not broken by the event of a physical death. Death is little more than the change of one of the aggregates, material form; the chain of the other aggregates, and hence the appearance of self-hood, continues unaffected as long as ignorant belief in the self remains.

A reading of section seventeen, "Examination of the Fruit of Action," indicates that the tendency of substantialist thinking extended to karma in the same way that it did to the transmigrating self. If the self transmigrates, the above argument held, then it must have a perduring essence. Likewise, if the fruits of an act necessarily follow the act, then the act must itself, in some way, also perdure. Even to say that the act disappears and only its influence remains is still to say that there is something remaining, asserted the opponent. Such a reification of karma ultimately contradicts anatman, the Buddha's declaration that nothing has a substantial existence. Yet it was of paramount importance to Buddhism to affirm that there is karma and that its effects are inescapable, for a denial of this would destroy the justification for morality. The Buddha's own morality stemmed from his insight into anatman, soullessness, which by definition results in selflessness. This selflessness awakened him to the plight of the suffering world, leading him to teach "for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world."[1] One who does not have this insight into soullessness may need an incentive to act compassionately, an incentive which the doctrine of karma provides. There was thus a need to affirm, in some way, the reality of karma.

The Buddha stressed the inescapability of karma by saying that its results "do not perish even after hundreds of millions of aeons. Reaching the harmony of conditions pratyayas) and the appropriate time, they produce consequences for human beings."[2] Nagarjuna explained this with an analogy that is cryptic at best. "Like an imperishable promissory note," he said, "so is debt as well as action. It is fourfold in terms of realms and indeterminate in terms of primal nature."[3] The meaning of this seems to be that karma does not have a substantial nature, just as borrowed money is not real. Karma does effect change, and borrowed money can be used

[1]Rahula, 46

[2]Kalupahana 1986, 250

[3]karika XVII.14

to buy things. However, borrowed money is not really one's own, and at a certain time it and /or whatever was purchased with it must be returned. Similarly, the fruits of an action must materialize, following which both the act and its fruit disappear. Although the process of karma is evident, the fact that an effect and its cause arise only in mutual dependence means that neither is truly real. They are "indeterminate in terms of primal nature." That karma is "fourfold in terms of realms" means that all spheres of existence are ruled by its effects: "there is no place on earth where a person can be released from his evil actions," said the Buddha.[1]

Nagarjuna concludes the section by stressing once again that neither the agent nor his or her act is real. An action cannot be created either from conditions (pratyayas) or from non-conditions for the reasons discussed in section one: if created from causes, then it would depend on those causes and ultimately not be separate from them. If created by non-conditions (pratyayas), then it would have appeared indeterminately and the universe would be characterized by caprice. Since the action is thereby produced neither by a causal agent nor by no agent, then the agent who would otherwise be defined in terms of that action does not exist. And, "if both action and agent are non-existent, where could there be the fruit born of action? When there is no fruit, where can there be an experiencer?"[2] It is necessary to uphold the moral path by affirming the process of karma, but declaring there to be a permanent nature residing therein is equally undesirable. Such a theory, Nagarjuna demonstrated, is logically indefensible. Nagarjuna reconciles these difficulties by closing this section with an analogy. Imagine that a person, through the use of magical powers, creates a golem, an artificial human, and that this creature in turn creates its own golem. "In the same way, an agent is like a created form and his action is like his creation. It is like the created form created by another who is created."[3] Dependent on each other, and within the sphere of relative existence, agents and their action are equally real and must be treated accordingly. From the once-removed standpoint of the enlightened being, neither is real. Bondage and karma are self-perpetuating, and the way to become free is to relinquish the belief in the permanent soul and thereby uproot both.

4.3.9. Section 18 — Self-hood and its Consequences

Nagarjuna apparently felt that he had not yet explained fully the way in

[1]Dhammapada, quoted in Kalupahana 1986, 54 (paraphrased)

[2]karika XVII.30

[3]karika XVII.31-32

which belief in a permanent individual leads to bondage. (The reader may feel the same.) He therefore addresses this issue more directly in section eighteen, "Examination of Self." This section, though short and though ostensibly an examination of this one particular topic, is actually one of the densest and weightiest in the entire work. Nagarjuna here mentions in passing certain issues of such far-reaching import that they elucidate the entire scope and purpose of this thought. Specifically, after discussing the connection between self-theories and bondage, he mentions the manner in which the sphere of thought and its conceptualizing activity evoke the entirety of reality, then he alludes to the nature of this reality (tathata) and the characteristics of final truth. The significance of these issues as relevant to the immediate topic of the section will be explained, but a fuller discussion of their broad import will have to wait.

The untenability of the concept of a permanent soul, atman, has already been addressed, but Nagarjuna now sums up once again and in a slightly different way the reasons for rejecting this belief. The self is neither identical with nor different from its constituent aggregates. If it were identical, then it would, like they, partake of arising and ceasing and thus not be permanent. If it were different from the aggregates, then it could not have the same characteristics of them; e.g. it could not have the potential for perception or the quality of consciousness. A consequence of the insubstantiality of the self Nagarjuna has not previously mentioned is the impossibility of it having possessions. "In the absence of the self, how can there be something that belongs to the self?" Since the self can have neither characteristics nor possessions, "one abstains from creating the notions of "mine" and "I."[1] The import of this is that it is "grasping" based on this possessiveness which binds one to repeated existence. Contact with the perceived world, if it is believed to have a real existence, leads to a desire for pleasant sensations and an aversion from unpleasant ones. Both are forms of grasping. If, on the other hand, the world is believed to be founded on nonexistence, then, the Buddha taught, yet another form of grasping results: one fears the supposed nihility of nonexistence and clings even more strongly to the cycle of repeated births. All of these forms of greedy clinging are rooted in the belief that there is a permanent soul which can possess things: possession leads to obsession. The teaching of soullessness counteracts these self-created fetters, for, by definition, the theory of no-self negates self-ish-ness. "When views pertaining to 'mine' and 'I'... have waned, then grasping comes to cease. With the waning of that [grasping], there is waning of birth."[2] A variety

[1]karika XVIII.2

[2]karika XVIII.4

of unwholesome actions and conceptions result from a firm belief in the self, including grasping and repulsion, passionate attractions and aversions, selfishness and pride, hedonism and excessive asceticism. These are all referred to as defilements, and it is these which occasion rebirth. When soullessness is realized, explains Nagarjuna, the defilements wane and freedom is attained.

Having demonstrated the soteriological importance of abandoning belief in the soul, Nagarjuna now rushes to forestall the antipodal error, namely an emphasis on the lack of soul. To interpret the Buddha as teaching the non- existence of the self is as bad as the tendency to reify self-ish-ness in the first place, for nihilism and pessimism would result. Thus, while "the Buddhas have made known the conception of self and taught the doctrine of no-self," Nagarjuna says, "they have not spoken of something as the self or as the non-self."[1] That is, Buddhism denies both atman and anatman, but it does not say that there is some "thing" which can be described as either having or lacking atman. The remaining verses of this section seem to be cautionary statements the intent of which is to prevent one from clinging to anatman as a theory. The teaching of soullessness is a dialectical device used to counteract the tendency to believe in the soul, nothing more. If one were to assert that the identity of the universe is anatman, then the Buddha would have to counteract this by saying that that, too, is erroneous. The theory of no-soul is not a real characteristic of existent things. It is no more than a way to obviate the reifying theories, dispositions, and graspings which cause suffering and lead to rebirth.

Nagarjuna follows this examination with four verses which deal with the nature of truth, essentially declaring it to be undefinable.[2] These verses do not immediately seem to have any relevance to the issue at hand, namely the nature of the self. Kalupahana interprets them in a questionable way. "Up to this point [Nagarjuna] was discussing an embodied self, a self associated with a psychophysical personality," says Kalupahana. The verses that follow, therefore, "are intended to explain the Buddha's view regarding the nature of a person when he attains [liberation]."[3] This interpretation is problematic. The word "self" is not used even once in the entire second half of the section, and the only hint that Nagarjuna could possibly be referring to the posthumous reality is that in one verse he uses the word tathya, "such" or "thus." This is a word with many significations. One of the uses of tathya is to refer to the nature of the individual who

[1]karika XVIII.6

[2](karika XVIII.8-11)

[3]Kalupahana 1986, 57

has achieved nirvana, the Tathagata. He or she does not have the illusion of partaking of any existential qualities and thus can only be referred to as "thus." This is apparently what Kalupahana had in mind: it is the use of tathya in this verse that leads him to interpret the entire second half of the section as a discussion of posthumous reality.[1] These verses describe truth, of whatever kind, as encompassing four possibilities: something is such (tathya), is not such, is both such and not such, and is neither such and not such. "Such is the Buddha's admonition."[2] Nagarjuna follows this verse with two verses that describe truth as having neither a single meaning or a variety of meanings, and a repeated admonition that dependently-arisen things are neither identical nor different, neither annihilated nor eternal.[3] An alternate and perhaps more defensible interpretation of the remainder of this section is that Nagarjuna is emphasizing his initial point. The self is neither real nor non-real and the Buddha's purpose in teaching anatman was wholly and simply pragmatic. The doctrine of soullessness is not to be understood as an independent and real truth, Nagarjuna is saying here, for "everything is such, not such, both such and not such, and neither such and not such."[4]

4.3.10. Sections 19-21 — Associative Compositions and Occurrence of Phenomena in Time

Nagarjuna next offers a brief look at three qualities of the apparent world. These three are time, the harmony existing between the elements constituting a phenomenon, and the occurrence and dissolution of such composite phenomena. His primary intention here is to demonstrate that, since the composite factors are, as proven above, devoid of self-nature, so must the things composed of them be devoid of real existence. Reductionism and atomism cannot account for the real production of a real world, he says. A brief aside is necessary to introduce and explain the background of this particular debate.

The Buddha, as explained above, said that the world can be seen in one way as being composed of elements (dharmas), spheres of sense and sense objects (ayatanas), and the psychophysical aggregates (skandhas). The Abhidharma refined these analyses by enumerating, classifying, and relating these various constituent factors, all in the hope of achieving a world-description that managed to be comprehensive without recourse to

[1] ibid., 58

[2] karika XVIII.8

[3] karika XVIII.9-11

[4] karika XVIII.8

soul theories. All physical and psychological phenomena were explained as being composed of discrete and separate elements, the mutual arising and continuity of which gives the illusion that there exist lasting identities, such as personhood. A felicitous analogy is that of the motion picture. A film is composed of static and separate photographs which individually have no capability of conveying motion or change. However, when these photographs flash, one by one, in contiguous succession, an illusion appears. The viewer sees a lasting and unbroken continuity. A film thereby creates an illusion of an uninterrupted process, the appearance of a real identity that is nowhere to be found in the individual elements comprising the apparent process. Such, held the Abhidharma theories, is the nature of reality. All things, events, and processes consist of nothing more than discrete, irreducible atomistic elements. These are referred to as "moments" ksana). The Buddha did not disagree with such reductionism, for he taught it. However, he in no way said that these moments are themselves real. Nagarjuna demonstrates in the next section, "Examination of Time," that it is in such reification of atomism that problems arise. Time must, to be perceived, be divided into past, present, and future. If there were not this division, then one would have no referents by which to perceive time. However, one cannot say that these three divisions exist as such. For example, the present and the future depend on the past for their determination. Yet, if they exist contingent upon the past, "then the present and the future would be in the past time."[1] If the thing called "present" and the thing called "future" did not exist at the same time as the thing called "past," then they could not relate to it. For example, the future could only come after some thing, it cannot just be "after" in an abstract sense. If the past no longer exists, though, then where is the thing the future is coming "after?" The things would have to exist contemporaneously to relate, for there can be no relation between two things if one of them does not yet exist or no longer exists. It is obvious, however, that the present and the future do not exist in the past, for this would oppose their very definitions. But, Nagarjuna continues, "if the present and the future were not to exist [in the past], how could the present and the future be contingent upon it?"[2] Combining these two statements, one is left with the following argument: 1) The present and the future must exist in the past for their relation and, thus, their reality to be upheld. 2) The present and the future do not exist in the past. 3) Therefore, the present and the future do not exist. 4) Consequently, all of the divisions of temporality are illusory.

One may object that there is another way to view temporality that

[1]karika XIX.1

[2]karika XIX.2

does not depend on such irreducible momentariness. Time could be said to exist as a concomitant of processes, not discrete events.[1] This would obviate such an extreme slicing of temporality into separate moments. However, time is not evident either as a static moment or as a dynamic process. "A non-static time is not observed. A static time is not observed." [2] Ultimately, processes are no more real than their component parts, but this is not what Nagarjuna chooses to emphasize here.[3] This is true from a philosophical (samvrti) standpoint. From the standpoint of ultimate truth (paramartha), though, both are concepts that have no final validity. What he calls attention to here is that neither static nor dynamic time is observed. Nagarjuna does not explain why neither is possible, but there is one probable explanation. The act of perception is not instantaneous — it, too, is dependent upon temporality. The awareness of an object or event is always separated, even if by the most infinitesimal amount, from the perception of the thing, which perception is in turn separated from the thing itself. This is so because, the Buddha taught, the perceiver and that which he or she perceives do not form a unified gestalt. The Buddha's theory of the five aggregates which comprise the person describes the process by which awareness of the world takes place. There is a physical (or sensory or conceptual) object, this object is sensed, this sensation is then classified and made cognizable through the separate process of perception, this perception is colored by dispositions, and finally consciousness forms a thought of the object. The thing of which the perceiver is aware is thus always in the immediate past. (If nothing else, it takes a span of time for light to travel from the visible object to the eye.) Hence, time cannot be observed, but only extrapolated.

The nature of temporality is the primary focus of this section, but Nagarjuna mentions, in passing, the applicability of the logical method used here to all concepts of relation. "Following the same method, …related concepts such as the highest, the lowest, and the middle, and also identity, etc. should be characterized."[4] (The wording of "identity, etc." is necessary for preservation of meter in the verse. What is meant is the distinguishing of identity, difference, both, or neither.) The meaning here is that in all relations of quality involving distinct elements, one cannot attribute the quality to any element individually. For example, a person's "tallness" cannot be part of his or her identity. He or she is only

[1]Murti 1960, 201

[2]karika XIX.5

[3]It has been stated that Buddhism shifted the emphasis from Being to Becoming, from the static moment to the dynamic process. (cf. pp. 47 and 83)

[4]karika XIX.4

tall in relation to one who is shorter.

The tendency to distinguish the elements that constitute reality and to define them in isolation led to another difficulty, namely the necessity to posit another type of thing called "harmony." This Nagarjuna addresses in section twenty, "Examination of Harmony." The word translated here as "harmony," samagri, also carries the meaning of totality, especially as in the complete collection or assemblage of materials used together to make an object.[1] An example is the visual perception of an object. In such a perception, the physical object, the sensation and perception of it, and the eye all come together to produce an awareness of visible form. The Buddha taught that an event like this is based on the dependent arising of all the elements which arise together and thereby produce visual perception. "Harmony" is here a description for their mutual dependence. The Abhidharma reification of the elements, however, required that one describe the coming together of such discrete elements as a separate thing, a unique whole not found in the parts. This view made harmony an attribute, not just a description; the metaphysical description of elements as discrete requires that the harmony between them become a separate entity itself.[2] The problem of causality then arises anew.

The four theories of causation are summarized again, this time in terms of the atomistic "moments" described above. The theory that one moment produces another moment which is subsequent and directly contiguous is a form of self-causation. The theory that one moment produces another moment which is subsequent but not directly contiguous is other-causation. The theory that a moment is produced by neither a preceding contiguous nor non-contiguous moment is neither-causation, or chaos. The three of these were discussed and rejected in Nagarjuna's first section. The fourth theory is that a moment is produced by a combination of self- and other- causation. In terms of the present discussion, that combination is the "harmony" between causes and causal conditions pratyayas). Nagarjuna, using the same methodological approach he used in the previous discussion of causality, declares that the effect is not to be found in this harmony any more than in the individual causes and conditions (pratyayas) producing the harmony. If one asserts that effects arise from such "harmonious" combinations of causes and conditions (pratyayas), then the notion of harmony is just being substituted for the effect-ive cause, which was refuted. The conclusion, too, is then identical: "the effect is not made by the harmony, nor is it not made by a [sic] harmony."[1]

[1]cf. Monier- Williams, 1204

[2]Kalupahana 1986, 61

The description of events as comprised of momentary units and things as comprised of atomistic elements leads to a discrepancy with the Buddha's theory of becoming, bhava, which Nagarjuna addresses in this next section, "Examination of Occurrence and Dissolution."[2] If the elements are discrete, then, Nagarjuna shows, it is not possible to explain how they can arise and cease in mutual dependence.

To review, the Buddha's original concept of dependent arising describes reality as consisting of the same elements later classified by the Abhidharma, but makes it clear that these elements do not exist independently; they come into being only through a process of mutual contingence. This mutual interdependence of phenomena shifted the emphasis from being to becoming. That is, whereas the Hindu philosophies found the essence of the universe in a substantial ("standing under") ground of "true being," the Buddha recognized no substantial essence of the universe — he saw all in terms of process, flux. The characteristic of reality is neither Being nor non-Being, but only Becoming. Change is evident, but there is not some thing that changes. The process itself is the only thing that can be seen as having any degree of certainty or reality.[3] This process of dependently arising phenomena is beginningless. If it had a beginning, then there would be one thing which came first, which thing would then be the originating cause of the entire subsequent chain. It is not that the beginning is hidden in immemorial time, nor that it is inaccessible due to having been set in motion by a transcendent power. Rather, a beginning is simply inconceivable. Likewise, neither can there be said to be an end to the process.

The tendency to find substantial identities in the elements led to a slightly different interpretation of the Buddha's theory of dependent arising. Whereas the Buddha had spoken of a "stream of becoming," i.e. a seamless flow, the Realists now spoke of a "series of becoming," i.e. a relation of independent serial entities.[4] Phenomena were seen as being comprised of these serial elements and so, as described above, theories of association, or "harmony," had to be formulated to account for apparent identities. Nagarjuna refutes these notions of serial becoming first by focusing on the impossibility of such associative harmonies to arise and cease. There can be no way to relate the "occurrence," or arising, of a phenomenon with its "dissolution," or cessation. "Dissolution does not exist either with or without occurrence. Occurrence does not exist either with

---

[1]karika XX.24

[2]Bhava, "becoming," is not to be confused with bhava, "existence." Cf. Monier-Williams, 748f. and 754.

[3]Hiriyanna, 142

[4]Kalupahana 1986, 62

or without dissolution."[1] If occurrence and dissolution existed together, then a thing would be disappearing at the same time that it was appearing. If occurrence existed without dissolution, then things would partake of a one-directional eternity — they would arise, but never cease. If dissolution existed without occurrence, then there would be the death of a thing which was never born. Neither can one attempt to avoid the dilemma by saying that dissolution is "potential" in a thing which is arising, but is not yet "actual." This would ascribe to a thing two contrary natures, that of occurrence and that of dissolution. No hypothetical proportion of "potentiality" versus "actuality" of these two natures in a thing, would, ultimately, disguise this internal disjunction. Another possibility Nagarjuna mentions is the attempt to circumvent the distinctions of occurrence and dissolution by describing gradual change. That is, instead of saying that an existent thing suddenly disappears, one can say that it just fades out of existence. But this will not work, either, for there still must be one discrete moment before which a thing was still fading and after which it is completely gone. "Dissolution of that which is waning does not exist, nor is there dissolution of the not waning."[2] A final objection Nagarjuna addresses is the empirical one. "It may occur to you that both occurrence and dissolution are seen," he says. That is, arguments regarding the logical tenability of arising and ceasing are immaterial, for both are unanimously observed to exist. "However," he declares, "both occurrence and dissolution are seen only through confusion."[3] The ignorant one may make such a claim, but the enlightened one knows better.

Nagarjuna concludes this section with a paradox. He has just demonstrated that arising and ceasing do not have real existence, and, therefore, "the stream of becoming is not proper in the context of the three periods of time." Nor can there be some other way of explaining the existential flux, for "how can there be a stream of becoming that does not exist during the three periods of time?"[4] It seems that he is not accepting any theory of becoming. However, as a devout Buddhist apologist, Nagarjuna certainly would not have denied a single aspect of the Buddha's teachings. The only solution to this dilemma is that he was not offering a blanket refutation of the stream of becoming, but only a refutation of the stream as viewed in a certain way. He does not explicitly state exactly which theory he is denying and which he will accept, but the most likely explanation is that he is rejecting the substantialist agenda. It is an error to

[1] karika XXI.1

[2] karika XXI.7

[3] karika XXI.11

[4] karika XXI.21

posit an independent nature in the discrete elements which comprise the serial flow. As dependently-arisen, no things are really spatially or temporally distinct. If no substantial identity is posited in the elements, then the issue of which produces which and when exactly each is produced and dissolved ceases to be problematic.

All of the sections of the Mulamadhyamakakarika up to this point have examined the specific elements, processes, and relations comprising reality. These are all side issues, so to speak. The Path of Buddhism is little concerned with what exact ontological status to grant to fire and fuel, for example. However, misunderstandings about the nature of these factors of reality can lead to problems of a more serious nature, and so all of the factors had to be examined individually before larger issues could be addressed. The remainder of the karika deals with precisely these larger issues. Nagarjuna first discusses the nature of the one who has become enlightened and realized nirvana, and then looks at the confusions and afflictions which hinder the attainment of enlightenment. The Noble Eightfold Path is examined next. The Path is the paramount teaching of the Buddha, for it is this Path, and this path only, which can lead to an escape from duhkha. A proper following of the Eightfold Path will lead to nirvana, the subject of the next section. Nagarjuna then examines what is the most affirmative teaching of Buddhism: the chain of dependent arising. This theory describes, clearly and positively, the ontological origin and nature of reality as well as the philosophical basis on which enlightenment can be achieved. In the final section, in a last preventative effort, Nagarjuna describes the specific errors leading to bondage and misunderstanding for the purpose of forestalling these errors.

4.3.11. Section 22 — The Meaning and Ontological Status of the Enlightened One

Siddhartha Gautama used a variety of epithets to refer to himself, including Sakyamuni, "Sage of the Sakya Clan," Buddha, "The Awakened One," and Tathagata, "The Thus-Gone One." The latter of these led to a host of misunderstandings, for the term seemed to imply that there is an agent, the "One," who "Goes" somewhere. That is, the enlightened person often was believed to be reborn in a transcendent realm. One later Chinese school of Buddhism went so far as to describe a "Pure Land," a concrete heavenly paradise where beings of high spiritual attainment sojourn before taking the final step towards complete nirvana.[1] To be fair, all attempts were made to explain that such spiritual abodes were not really

[1]Kohn, 174.

existent. Whether popular belief understood this, though, is questionable. The original meaning of “Tathagata” is no longer known for certain,[1] but that to which the Buddha was referring in using the term was clearly explained. Nagarjuna clarifies it in section twenty-two, “Examination of the Tathagata.” Tathagata is merely a designation for that being who has released graspings and dispositions, is thereby freed from karma and, following the next death, will completely disappear and never experience another birth. The defiling dispositions which created the illusion of person-hood out of the aggregates have been “appeased,” or released. The aggregates still exist by dint of the inertia of previous karma, and so the enlightened being still appears to exist. Since there are no longer graspings at work, though, the apparent being will disappear when the last inertial karma has been spent.

The Buddha made quite clear the fact that the Tathagata has not “gone somewhere.” In answer to his disciple Vaccha’s persistent questions regarding the nature of the Tathagata after death, the Buddha offered an analogy:

“What think you, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you, would you be aware that the fire was burning in front of you?”

”[Yes.]”

”…Vaccha, if the fire burning in front of you were to become extinct, would you be aware that the fire in front of you had become extinct?”

”[Yes.]”

“But, Vaccha, if someone were to ask you, ’In what direction has that fire gone, — east, or west, or north, or south?’ what would you say?”

“The question would not fit the case, Gautama.”[2]

The point is that a fire depends on certain elements for its existence, such as wood, heat, and oxygen. When these elements are no longer present, the fire does not leave, as such — it just ceases to exist. Similarly, a person is dependent on the aggregates, ignorance, and grasping. When ignorance and grasping cease to be operative, and when the inertia of the last of the aggregates, i.e. the body, is spent, then the person ceases to exist. The person is “thus-gone,” but there is no transcendent realm in which he or she is reborn. That is, the person has “gone,” but he or she has not gone some where.

---

[1]For example, it is not wholly clear whether it is a compound of tatha + gata, “Thus Gone,” or tatha + agata, “Thus Come.” Cf. Conze 1975, 36, and Nagao 1991, 205.

[2]Majjhima- nikaya, quoted in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 290

This teaching, while clear, was not easy to comprehend. The Buddha warned his disciples numerous times that his message was "recondite, subtle, and profound." It is therefore easy to see why Nagarjuna devoted a section to this concept. Not only had it always been a difficult one to understand, but, further, the recent Realist and Substantialist trends had precipitated even more confusions. One tendency was to hold that the Tathagata was composed of some substance not found in ordinary unenlightened humans. This propensity to believe that the person's nature underwent some essential transformation upon the achievement of enlightenment was evidenced even in the Buddha's time. The theory was that the soul which is unenlightened partakes of the quality of bondage, and, when this soul becomes free, then its essence shifts to now partake of the quality of freedom.[1] Nagarjuna explains clearly that the nature of the Buddha is identical to that of any other person, and it has neither the "quality" of bondage nor the "quality" of freedom. There is no self to be found in either the bound or the freed person; both are composed of nothing but the soulless aggregates, and there is no real self which can be thus qualified. "The Tathagata is neither the aggregates nor different from them. The aggregates are not in him; nor is he in the aggregates. He is not possessed of the aggregates." This definition of the Tathagata is no different than that of any and all persons. Thus, "in such a context, who is a Tathagata?"[2] The existence of a self in the Buddha is denied for the same reasons that it is denied in any person. If the Buddha is independent of the aggregates, then he will not evidence their characteristics, e.g. he will not have a body, sensations, or consciousness. If the Buddha depends on the aggregates, then "he does not exist in terms of self-nature." Further, if his essence were to change upon enlightenment, then he would now have a different, or "other- nature." But, if he does not exist in terms of self-nature, then "how can he exist in terms of other-nature?"[3]

As all that exists is ruled by the process of dependent arising, one cannot say that the Tathagata has an independent and transcendent existential status. Even though the Buddha has ceased to grasp on to the aggregates, "he should still depend upon them in the present. As such he will be dependent… There exists no Tathagata independent of the aggregates."[4] This is not to say that the Buddha has a self which exists even in the present. Having abandoned grasping and soul-theorizing, it is only

---

[1]This notion was likely a product of the influence of Jainism, which believed that the defiling karma is an actual substance that adheres to the soul (jiva).

[2]karika XXII.1

[3]karika XXII.2

[4]karika XXII.5-6

the external appearance of him which exists. It is grasping which causes the aggregates to continue coming together in life after life, grasping for self-assertion, for sense-fulfillments, and for continued existence. Since the Buddha has become enlightened by virtue of having released his tendency to grasp, he no longer believes that there is a self comprising him in the present, and so he knows that he will not exist after death, either. It is only, Nagarjuna says, the misguided drive to attribute reality to the objects of grasping, the grasping itself, and the one who grasps that embroils the ignorant person in the tangle of existence-theorizing. It is only this misguided person, "firmly insisting that a Tathagata 'exists' or 'does not exist,"' who ascribes a present or posthumous existence to the Buddha.[1] That is, even though the Buddha no longer falsely believes that he exists, it is still possible for those who do imagine reality to attribute an existence to him. Nagarjuna explains that these people are seeing nothing more than a figment of their imaginations. "Those who generate obsessions with great regard to the Buddha…, all of them, impaired by obsessions, do not perceive the Tathagata."[2]

4.3.12. Sections 23-24 — Error and Truth : the Perversions and the Four Noble Truths

Nagarjuna has thus far examined all of the elements of existence and negated substantialist understandings of all, and has discussed the nature of the enlightened one who sees the true nature of things. Before presenting the positive teachings of the Buddha's doctrine, Nagarjuna found it necessary to devote section twenty-three, "Examination of Perversions," to an explanation of the origins of confusions and misunderstandings. The subject of this section, viparyasa, is best translated as "perversion." The meaning of "perversion" here is not so much the common one of moral or sexual debasement, but rather the etymological meaning of "turning through" (per + vertere) and hence "error" or "delusion." [3] in which the first meanings of viparyasa given are "overturning" and "transposition."

The Buddha said that all conditioned things are characterized by three "marks:" impermanence, soullessness, and suffering. These are not absolute definitions of reality, but rather descriptions of the nature of reality as perceived by the enlightened person. The epistemic ignorance of the unenlightened person lies in his or her falsely knowing the world as

[1]karika XXII.13

[2]karika XXII.15

[3]cf. Monier-Williams, 974,

permanent, containing a soul, or non-suffering. Besides these three corruptions of the three marks, the Buddha mentioned one other type of perversion, which perversion is a value judgment independent of the three marks. This is the human propensity to characterize things as wholesome or unwholesome, pleasant or unpleasant. Since Nagarjuna has already examined the three marks in previous sections, here he first takes up the latter perversion, the subjective value judgments. The defilements such as passionate attraction and aversion (lust and hatred), Nagarjuna says, "have thought as their source," and it is on the basis of these defilements that value judgments such as pleasant and unpleasant come to be.[1] All persons, whether Buddhas or unenlightened persons, continue to perceive and have sensations, both pleasant and unpleasant. The difference is that the sensations of the Buddhas are not filtered through defilements, and so they do not believe that there is a real objective ground supporting the subjective experiences of pleasant and unpleasant.

Nagarjuna spends the first half of this section demonstrating the unreality of the foundations of perversions, thereby showing that it is possible to overcome them. He first offers a rationale for abandoning belief in one of the foundations of perversion, namely the defiling tendencies of passions and grasping. Discriminatory judgments such as pleasant and unpleasant are based on the defilements for, were there no passionate attraction and aversion, there would be no need for one to judge things as pleasant or unpleasant. All sensations would be accepted with equanimity and detached acceptance. "The existence or non-existence of the self is not established in any way," Nagarjuna reminds the reader, and "without that, how can the existence or the non-existence of the defilements be established?"[2] One may object that the defilements must exist, for they are experienced. Nagarjuna counters this argument by explaining that the defilements exist in the same way that the person does: both the defilements and the one defiled may be experienced in ignorance, but neither is substantive — neither is to be found anywhere in the agglomeration of aggregates which comprise the apparent person. Thus, as demonstrated in the examination of the self in section eighteen, there is no reality in either the defilements or the one defiled. Conversely, the defilements could be said to be dependent on the perversions, for, were there no discrimination of pleasant or unpleasant, there could be no reason for aversion or attraction. Yet this will not work either, for "the perversions regarding the pleasant and the unpleasant are not evident from the standpoint of self-nature." This being so, on what could the defilements of passionate

[1]karika XXIII.1

[2]karika XXIII.3

aversion and attraction be based?[1] Finally, one could cling to the belief in pleasant and unpleasant based on the reality of the sensations giving rise to these categories. Nagarjuna here delivers the coup de grace to the belief in the reality of such discriminations. Visual form, sound, taste, touch, smell, and concepts (i.e. mental sensations) are the "sixfold foundations" of defilements and discriminatory judgments. But, as demonstrated above,[2] all six sensory foundations "are comparable to [a mythical city] and resemble mirages and dreams. How can the pleasant and the unpleasant come to be in people who are fabrications of illusion or who are comparable to mirror images?"[3] That is, the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the one who discriminates between them are all unreal. As such, Nagarjuna asks, whence the justification for passionate feelings? In the same way that discriminating sensation into pleasant and unpleasant gives rise to adverse graspings, so does it hinder enlightenment to pervert the other marks of existence, i.e. confusing the impermanent for the permanent, the soulless as having an ego, and the suffering as non-suffering.

A Buddhist would have an obvious motivation in aggressively denying the reality of the senses, the discrimination of sensations into pleasant and unpleasant, and the passionate attractions and aversions which arise on the basis of such discriminations. It is only when these tendencies and perversions are understood as being groundless that they can be appeased and the detachment of nirvana attained. If these unpropitious aspects of existence were real, if they had self- nature, then they could never be appeased, Nagarjuna says. Likewise, an emphasis on the unreality of the one who discriminates facilitates release from perversions. "Perversions do not occur to one who is already subject to perversion," nor do they "occur to one who is not subjected to perversions," nor do they "occur to one who is being subjected to perversions." The untenability of relating a subject and its attribute in any of the three phases of time was explained in section two in the examination of the moverand the moved. This being so, Nagarjuna delivers the exhortation to "reflect on your own! To whom will the perversions occur?"[4] The above tack aside, Nagarjuna had an additional reason for explaining perversions and confusions here: his next three sections deal with "right views," i.e. the Buddha's teachings of the Noble Truths, the nature of nirvana, and the process of dependent arising. A person will be able to comprehend these only if he or she first understands the false knowledge and perversions which hinder such compre-

[1]karika XXIII.6

[2]cf. sections IV, "Examination of Aggregates" and XVIII, "Examination of Self."

[3]karika XXIII.8-9

[4]karika XXIII.17-18

hension.

The Buddha expressed the core of his teaching in the four Noble Truths. These are 1) suffering exists, 2) suffering has a cause, namely craving and grasping, 3) suffering, having been caused, can be ended, and 4) the Eightfold Path is the way to end it. These are all truths, but they do not represent an objective and absolute Truth. Truths for the Buddha were pragmatic. An Absolutist philosophy, such as Plato's theory of the Forms, defines a concept's truth in terms of how well that concept corresponds to the transcendent and independent standard, the Absolute Truth. A pragmatic philosophy, on the other hand, does not recognize such an independent standard by which relative truths can be measured. Pragmatism holds that knowledge exists only as a tool to be used, and the test of a concept's truthfulness is its practical consequences.[1] That the Buddha's attitude towards truth is one of pragmatismcan be seen in the fact that, were all four Noble Truths absolute, they would contradict. For example, the first announces the fact of suffering, but the third declares that suffering can be eradicated.[2] This is perhaps why the Buddha referred to them as "noble" (arya) truths: their importance is in their value and worthiness, not in their absolute validity. The implication of this is that they have a use and a purpose. This schemata of truth is the subject of section twenty-four, "Examination of the Noble Truths."

It is certain that Nagarjuna upheld the validity of the Buddha's Noble Truths, for he stressed the value of the Buddha's teachings at every turn. However, it would be easy, after reading the Mulamadhyamakakarika thus far, to get the impression that Nagarjuna was denying all and asserting nothing. Specifically, he has thus far declared all existent things, grasping, the grasper, and even the Buddha himself to be devoid of self-nature and "empty," sunya.[3] Such comprehensive negations would, it would seem, deny the validity of all teachings, including the Buddha's, and sabotage the Eightfold Path leading to nirvana. Nagarjuna presents this counter argument in the first six verses this section. If all is empty, the opponent could charge, all causation would be invalidated. This would lead to a denial of the Noble Truths. There are four attainments, or fruits, corresponding to the four truths, namely understanding the nature of suffering (duhkha), relinquishing the passions which cause suffering, realizing the goal of nirvana, and cultivating the proper Path towards the goal. But, the opponent continues, if the Noble Truths are empty then likewise there could not be these attainments, there would be none who

---

[1]Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 602

[2]Kalupahana 1992, 168

[3]karika XIII.3, XXII.10,14 respectively

achieve enlightenment and break free from the cycle of birth-and- death, and finally, there would not even be a Buddha. "Speaking in this manner about emptiness," the opponent concludes, "you contradict the three jewels [of the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of Buddhists], as well as the reality of the fruits, both good and bad, and all such worldly conventions."[1]

Nagarjuna's answer to this cogent objection is simple: "we say that you do not comprehend the purpose of emptiness. As such, you are tormented by emptiness and the meaning of emptiness."[2] The opponent's objections would hold true if Nagarjuna was saying that all the elements of reality are empty of reality and validity. However, what he has actually said is slightly different — he said that the teaching of emptiness, sunyata, has a purpose. It is not an absolute statement, but a pragmatic one. To explain this, he introduces here the notion of two levels of truth. "The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddhas is based upon two truths: truth relating to worldly convention and truth in terms of ultimate fruit." [3] The conventional truth, samvrti, is that which is used in the everyday world. Even though all is a realm of mere appearance, one must still use concepts to communicate with others and to function in the world. For example, even though the enlightened one understands that there is no "mover"who "moves," he or she still utilizes the conceptions of movement to discuss going to the store. Likewise, even though the Buddha stressed the unreality of the person and the complete lack of egoity in the world, he still, when communicating, used terms like "myself" and "you." The other form of truth is paramartha, which can be translated as "supreme truth" or "ultimate fruit." As the term artha, "fruit" or "goal" implies, this level still does not represent an ultimate, absolute Truth. It is a truth that does not rely on relative meanings, but rather is provisional. Goal-oriented, the supreme truth is conducive to attaining the fruits.

The four Noble Truths, i.e. the fact of suffering, its cause, its cure, and the Eightfold Path leading to its removal are all expressed in terms of conventional truth. Nirvana is the higher truth, the "greatest fruit," paramartha. These two levels of truth often contradict. For example, the first limb of the Eightfold Path is "right views." One must subscribe to the proper conceptual worldview to follow the Buddhist path. However, the higher truth of paramartha denies that there is an ultimate "right view." In the state of nirvana, all is seen to be empty, and nothing is right or wrong, better or worse. What is crucial to point out is that samvrti and

[1]karika XXIV.1-6

[2]karika XXIV.7

[3]karika XXIV.8

paramartha are both called "truths." There is no line drawn here between truth and falsehood, for that would give rise to absolutism — something can only be false if there is one single, independent standard against which to measure it. Thus, instead of the true /false dichotomy integral to Absolutisms, the Buddha spoke in terms of truth versus "confusion," i.e. using knowledge pragmatically and beneficially versus being bound by it.[1]

The use of conventional language and relative truths is necessary for teaching. "Without relying upon convention, the ultimate fruit is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate fruit, freedom is not attained." [2] The truths expressed by samvrti are necessary to point the way to the ultimate goal. Language and concepts must be utilized. Once the goal is in sight, these relative truths must be abandoned. It is at this stage that one perceives all things to be devoid of soul and empty of reality, and one realizes that the ultimate truth is itself not really a "truth." What is vital is always to keep in mind which level of truth one is working with. If one mistakenly applies the conception of emptiness to the relative realm, for example, then one could see things as meaningless. This would cause one to be left in a state of distress and lose faith in the Buddha and his teaching. "A wrongly perceived emptiness ruins a person of meager intelligence," warns Nagarjuna. "It is like a snake that is wrongly grasped." [3] If anyone "generates any obsessions or confusions with regard to emptiness, the accompanying error is not ours," he disclaims. Such a confusion is akin to that of a person who, mounting his horse, promptly forgets where his horse is![4]

It is just such a mistaken attribution of ultimate truths to the relative realm that led the hypothetical opponent above to conclude that Nagarjuna was denying the validity of the Buddha's message. The opponent had simply assumed that Nagarjuna's notion that all things are empty invalidates all teachings, as well. Nagarjuna now turns the table on the opponent. On the contrary, he says, it is the denial of emptiness and the assertion of self- nature that negates the Noble Truths. He spends the remaining two-thirds of the section demonstrating that theories of self-nature and individual identity contradict all the Buddha's teachings and preclude the very possibility of enlightenment. If existent things are not devoid of a self-nature, then, for the reasons explained above, they must be eternal and unchanging. If so, then they are both uncaused and inca-

---

[1]Kalupahana 1986, 46

[2]karika XXIV.10

[3]karika XXIV.11

[4]karika XXIV.13,15

pable of cessation. This will nullify the notions of an agent and his or her acts, which will then render him or her incapable of appeasing the defiling dispositions and escaping from the cycle of suffering. The Eightfold Path will then be purposeless and its goal unattainable. Thus, Nagarjuna concludes, notions of self- nature and a denial of emptiness will make the entirety of the Buddha's teachings completely pointless.

A key to understanding the two truths is dependent arising. It is the insight that all existent things have come to be only through a process of mutual interaction and causation that provides the understanding of emptiness. "We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness," says Nagarjuna.[1] All things that have come to be dependent on others are, by definition, relative. That is, they only have identity in relation to other things, as "tallness" has identity only in relation to "shortness." Since they are arisen things they are not unreal. On the other hand, since they are relative things they are not absolutely real. Neither are they both real and unreal, for that would constitute an internal contradiction. However, neither can they be said to be neither real nor unreal: as arisen, they are real, but as dependent, they are unreal. The only remaining way to speak of arisen things is by saying that they are in the middle between the extremes. All discourse and conceptualization about dependently-arisen things is thus said to be the "middle path." This is the key to the whole issue of truth and reality covered in this section. "Whoever perceives dependent arising also perceives suffering, its arising, its ceasing, and the path," says Nagarjuna in closing.[2] That is, whoever perceives dependent arising understands the ontology of existent things and perceives the Buddha's four Noble Truths.

4.3.13. Section 25 — The Ultimate Goal: Enlightenment

Having explained the Madhyamika stance on the reality of the Noble Truths, Nagarjuna now can examine the goal of them and of the entire Buddhist path, nirvana. There may be no single concept in Buddhism which has elicited more confusion and debate than nirvana. Nirvana is often translated as "freedom," but it actually means "extinction." A literal translation of "nirvana" is "blown out," as in the extinguishing of a fire. Nirvana is not a state of transcendent eternal bliss, like that of some forms of Yoga or of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta, nor sanctified salvation, like that of the Christianity, nor final posthumous nonexistence, like that of some Materialist philosophies. It is, simply, the cessation of those factors which cause bondage, namely cravings, dispositions, and karma.

---

[1]karika XXIV.18

[2]karika XXIV.40

An example of the extinction of nirvana is afforded by the Buddha's analogy of the fire given above. When the fire is extinguished, it does not go anywhere, east, west, north, or south. It simply ceases to be. Similarly, the one who has appeased, or eliminated, the snares binding one to the cycle of birth-and-death can be said to have attained freedom, for he or she is now free of the binding influences. But, this does not mean that the freed one goes on to heavenly realm or a state of sanctified bliss. This person does not disappear only to reappear elsewhere. The freed one simply is no longer. It is not that the enlightened person ceases to exist, for he or she never existed in the first place. It was only an illusion of real existence that caused the one now free to have been bound to existence in the first place, and it is an equally ignorant illusion of those viewing the freed one to think that he or she exists now. That is, nothing goes out of existence; it never existed in the first place.[1]

In section twenty-five, "Examination of Nirvana," Nagarjuna eliminates various misconceptions about this state of freedom. It is not a form of existence, nor is it non-existence. It is not a "thing" which, like all things, is dependent on all other things for its manifestation. Nor is it an independent thing. The fact that nirvana is spoken of being "realized," "attained," or "achieved" is not to be understood as implying that freedom is a thing which can be known or possessed. These verbs are just convenient ways samvrti) of speaking about an inexpressible concept. Nagarjuna's concern, as a Buddhist, was both to defend the Buddha's philosophy and to help his fellow Buddhists escape the cycle of suffering. This exposition of nirvana, then, is to be taken neither as a contribution to a philosophical debate nor as a theory to be defended. It is a pragmatic concept which can be used as a tool for escaping from suffering. To be useful as such, it must be understood in the proper way. Hence this section, whose purpose is a clarification of the concept and the improper understandings of it.

He opens the section with the opponent's objection that, if all is really empty, then there is no arising of things and so there is nothing to be extinguished (nir - vana). Nagarjuna replies, as before, that "if all this is non- empty, there exists neither arising nor ceasing." If there is svabhava,

---

[1]It has been mentioned repeatedly that a principal cause of bondage is the process through which a person ignorantly perceives reality in unreal things, feels passionate attractions or aversions to those perceived things, and then grasps onto them. If it is unclear how it can be that strong emotions can be aroused by a mere illusion, an analogy from mythology may be illuminating: Ovid recounted the story of a young Greek sculptor named Pygmalion and Galatea who, fearing and hating women, vowed to pour all of his creative energy into his art alone. He carved one statue of a woman, which he named Galatea, which proved to be so perfect and beautiful that he fell in love with it. Venus took pity on his frustrated desires and brought Galatea to life, and the two were married. This story suggests that human passions do not discriminate between real and unreal objects.

a self-nature in things, then it is that which will prevent freedom.[1] Having rejected self- nature by saying that all is empty, he is now faced with a problem. If there are no things, then what is freedom, and how can one speak of it or strive for it? The Buddha offered various definitions of nirvana, one of which Nagarjuna now makes use of. "Unrelinquished, not reached, unannihilated, non-eternal, non-ceased and non-arisen — this is called freedom."[2] One substantialist notion of freedom was that the bound person partakes of the quality of bondage. Freedom, then, would be the relinquishing of this nature and the adoption of a new and wholly disparate mode of existence — the freed state. This does not apply. There is not a person who partakes of qualities, and freedom is not a concrete goal that can be striven for. An eternalist soteriology would hold that the state of freedom transcends temporality, and the one who achieves freedom also becomes eternal. Nirvana is not such, for it is non- eternal. Neither, however, is it a temporal state of salvation, for it is "unannihilated." It cannot have any relation to temporality, which is measured by arising and ceasing, for it is "non-ceased and non-arisen." Freedom is thus not obtainable, not a transcendent reality, and not, like the Vedanta atman, a preexisting immanent substratum.

Further, nirvana has absolutely no relation to the concepts of either existence or non-existence. If it were a form of existence, then, like all existent things, it would partake of birth and death, arising and ceasing. It would be relative and thus conditioned, for there are no existent things that are unconditioned. If conditioned, it could not be independent. These would necessitate that nirvana, like all conditioned and dependent things, be characterized by impermanence and suffering, which would make for a poor enlightenment, indeed. Neither can freedom be said to be non-existence, for, "wherein there is no existence, therein non-existence is not evident."[3] The two are relative concepts. Moreover, if freedom were said to be non-existence, it would, as one half of a dual conception, still not be independent. Nagarjuna echoed the Buddha's clear assertion that nirvana is neither transcendent existence nor posthumous annihilation. In discussing the nature of the enlightened one in an earlier section, he clearly stated that "the thought that the Buddha exists or does not exist after death is not appropriate."[4]

Notwithstanding such difficulties, nirvana must be seen as non-contingent and independent. If it were not, then it would not be free from

[1]karika XXV.2

[2]karika XXV.3

[3]karika XXV.7

[4]karika XXII.14

the contingency and dependence of the suffering world. The solution, the Buddha said, is to relinquish the notions of becoming and being in all forms. Therefore, "it is proper to assume that freedom is neither existence nor non-existence."[1] That is, if one completely ceases to think in terms of being, then neither arising nor ceasing, origination nor annihilation will be posited. There is another possible interpretation of the Buddha's exhortation to relinquish notions of being. One could say that, instead of seeing freedom as neither existence nor non-existence, one could see it as both, as a transcendence of the two categories or, in Hegelian terms, a synthesis of thesis and antithesis. This would declare freedom to be some sort of mystical consciousness which is both existence and non-existence by virtue of being a transcendence of the dualities. This will not work, either, Nagarjuna now shows, for nirvana can contain no aspect of either half of the duality. If it were both existence and non- existence, then, rather than being independent, it would be dependent on both and thus doubly contingent. Further, since existence and non-existence are mutually exclusive opposites, "their simultaneous existence in one place is not possible, as in the case of light and darkness."[2]

That which precipitated the debate was the Buddha's teaching that freedom is attainable, and the following speculations of his followers about what sort of existence the Buddha enjoyed after death, i.e. after his full attainment of nirvana.[3] Complete freedom, "total extinction" (parinirvana), only occurs at death when the body, too, is extinguished. As Nagarjuna has just shown, no theories of the Buddha's existential status seem to be possible. Thus, "it is not assumed that the Blessed One [i.e. the Buddha] exists after death. Neither is it assumed that he does not exist, or both, or neither."[4] An immediate question following this statement is "then what happened to him? He obviously existed at one point, and now he doesn't, so where did he go?" Nagarjuna's answer is startling: "It is not assumed that even a living Blessed One exists. Neither is it assumed that he does not exist, or both, or neither."[5] The answer, then, is that nothing happened to the Buddha. His existential status did not change when he attained nirvana, for he could not even be said to have existed before it.

If the Buddha's nature before his nirvana was the same as his nature after enlightenment, then the only thing that changed was his subjective

---

[1]karika XXV.10 (na bhavo nabhavo nirvanam)

[2]karika XXV.14

[3]There are two forms of nirvana: the one achieved during life is a state of freedom but, since the freed one still has a karmically-bound body, it is not complete nirvana.

[4]karika XXV.17

[5]karika XXV.18

understanding. His actual nature did not change. An even more startling conclusion follows from this: if his nature did not change, then the world of suffering, samsara, must not be different from the world experienced by the freed person. This is exactly what Nagarjuna concludes. "The life-process has no thing that distinguishes it from freedom. Freedom has no thing that distinguishes it from the life- process."[1] There is no transcendent reality, no unique state of freedom experienced by the enlightened one. The worlds experienced by the one bound by suffering and the one freed from suffering are not different worlds. Nirvana is nothing more than a shift in understanding the world and a new way of reacting to it. However, Nagarjuna is quick to say, this does not mean that the cycle of life-and- death and freedom are the same. "Whatever is of the extremity of freedom and the extremity of the life-process, between them not even a subtle something is evident."[2] If they were simply declared to be identical, then there would be neither the experience of suffering nor the experience of release from it. Although the cycle of birth-and-death and nirvana are not different, then, they are nonetheless experienced differently and are not simply one and the same.

The cause of this whole sphere of confusions and misunderstandings about the nature of freedom is the human tendency to speculate and theorize. Were there not this tendency, then one would never perceive transitory phenomena as enduring in the first place, which would prevent one from developing passionate attractions and aversions regarding phenomena. Without such passions, the dispositions, graspings and cravings would not develop, and thus suffering would not come to be. Without these passions, one would not create the concepts of eternal life, identity or difference, or infinity of the universe, concepts which the Buddha repeatedly refused to discuss. The notion of emptiness is an antidote to this chain which has its birth in confused understanding and its result in suffering. For, "when all things are empty, why [speculate on] the finite, the infinite, both the finite and the infinite and neither the finite nor the infinite? Why speculate on the identical, the different, the eternal, the non-eternal, both, or neither?"[3] When one completely and utterly ceases to grasp onto theories and perceptions, speculation comes to an end, and dispositions are "blown out." This is nirvana.

---

[1] karika XXV.19

[2] karika XXV.20

[3] karika XXV.22-23

4.3.14. Section 26 — Dependent arising, the Buddha's Positive Ontology

Section twenty-six, "Examination of the Twelve Causal Factors," is the penultimate examination of the karika. It is a highly anomalous section. First, there is hardly a single original statement in it, the entire section being no more than a presentation of the twelve links of the chain of dependent arising as taught by the Buddha. Second, there are none of the cryptic and negatory statements so characteristic of the previous four hundred verses. This has led some commentators to assume that it and the last section, "Examination of Views," are merely summations of Theravada, "Older School," doctrine. This opinion holds that the first twenty-five sections were the exposition of Madhyamika thought, and these last two Nagarjuna added as an appendix of sorts. Another hypothesis proposed is that these last two sections are actually spurious.[1] Nagarjuna completed his treatise with the examination of nirvana, this hypothesis holds, and the last sections were added by someone who wished to make Nagarjuna appear to be a Theravadin.

There does not seem to be any justification for either of these views. Regarding the last two sections as non-Madhyamika may help one uphold certain theories about the nature of Madhyamika. The Prasangika school, for example, asserts that Nagarjuna was denying all concepts and advancing none of his own. Since section twenty-six decidedly presents a positive theory, it would be convenient for the Prasangika orientation to regard it as spurious. There is, however, no apparent reason to interpret this section in that manner. If it is rejected because it is positive and thus seems anomalous, then the dedicatory verses, as well, could be rejected, and then so could any verse which was difficult to interpret. These last sections will therefore be accepted as Nagarjuna's legitimate and intended conclusion to his treatise.

Nagarjuna presents the Buddha's twelve links in the chain of dependent arising in the same order and manner in which the Buddha presented them. The only innovation is that he inserts two verses from another sutra to clarify one point and concludes the section with three verses which summarize the way to reverse the cycle. The Buddha's chain of dependent arising was already discussed in chapter two, and will be explained fully in chapter five. This section is short, though, and the subject very important, so it will not hurt to follow Nagarjuna's verses and present it again.

The causal chain begins with ignorance. The true nature of reality

[1]Kalupahana 1986, 77

is impermanence, soullessness, and suffering. One who does not perceive this fact will believe that things are real, that there are enduring identities and egos, and that it is possible to find satisfaction in these things. One forms dispositions, such as attraction and aversion, on the basis of such misbeliefs. One then initiates volitional action, e.g. approaching that which one desires and avoiding that which is undesirable. Based on such dispositions, consciousness infuses the new life-form. That is, consciousness does not create the attractions and aversions, but rather they are primal and give rise to consciousness. It may seem odd to say that consciousness does not arise until this point, for most religious systems regard consciousness as eternal, all-pervasive, and ultimate. Buddhism, however, holds it to be dependently-arisen. Consciousness is but one of the five aggregates constituting a person. Until there is an awareness of subject /object duality, there can be nothing of which to be conscious. Therefore, consciousness neither can arise nor is needed until there is an awareness of a subject interacting with a separate world. The dispositionally- conditioned attractions and aversions provide the earliest basis of and need for interaction. Following this infusion of consciousness, "name and form," i.e. the psychophysical personality, come to be. This is where the new life can be said to be a "person" proper. The awareness of name-and-form both creates the individual identity and also causes the awareness of the objective world. Before the rise of name-and-form, it would be possible to see attractions and aversions as occurring and acting as simple natural forces. Now, however, name-and-form cause awareness both of internal subject and external object, both of "me" and "it." This awareness conditions the six spheres of sense-faculty, i.e. the five physical sense- faculties plus mental sensations, which are called thoughts. These sense-faculties are not actual feelings, but just the potential means by which feeling can occur. The duality of subject and object plus the potential for sensation afforded by the sense-faculties gives rise to contact itself and the actual feeling which ensues.

Nagarjuna here inserts a few lines from one of the early canonical texts to help explain the nature of contact. Using the example of vision, he says that contact proceeds from "the harmonious occurrence of the three factors: material form, consciousness, and eye. Feeling proceeds from such contact."[1] Dependent upon feeling is craving. When one has sensation, then one develops likings for certain feelings and aversions for others. This leads to grasping, which takes the two forms of passionate desire to partake of pleasant sensations and avoid unpleasant ones. With the development of grasping, the one who grasps now becomes bound to

[1]karika XXVI.5

the cycle of birth-and-death. Nagarjuna here points out a converse progression. "If [the grasper] were to be a non-grasper, he would be released, and there would be no further becoming."[1] This, Nagarjuna points out, is a weak link in the chain. This is where the cycle of suffering can be broken and freedom won. One may not have control over the earlier links of the chain, such as primal ignorance or past karma, but one assuredly has the ability, here and now, to refrain from grasping. With detached equanimity, bondage would be broken. If one does grasp, then the five aggregates constituting the psychophysical personality will be bound by dispositionally-conditioned karma and will continue to arise again and again. This will lead to unending rebirths, which in turn will lead to unending deaths. This is the final link of the chain. "Such is the occurrence of this entire mass of suffering."[2]

In summary, Nagarjuna reminds the reader that "the ignorant [person] forms dispositions that constitute the source of the life process," and hence all suffering. The key is to remove ignorance, which can be done by cultivating knowledge and wisdom. The wise person will not initiate the cycle of suffering, "because of his perception of truth."[3] The truth in question is dependent arising and its concomitant, emptiness. When all things are seen as being empty, one can form no dispositions about them and will cause neither passionate attractions nor aversions to come into play. This will prevent grasping. There is thus a certain circularity in the chain of dependent arising and the way to break free from the chain. Nagarjuna said above, in verse seven of this section, that the weak link is grasping. If one ceases to grasp, then dispositions will wane and endless rebirths will cease. In another way, however, breaking free from grasping is the result of the appeasement of dispositions. That is, one must refrain from grasping to release the dispositions, and one must release the dispositions to refrain from grasping. There is also a sort of catch-22 evident in the first two links of the chain: "When ignorance has ceased, there is no occurrence of dispositions." However, the cessation of that ignorance takes place only as a result of the release of dispositions.[4] The two halves of each of these equations, grasping + dispositions and ignorance + dispositions, arise together. They must also be released together. This may seem paradoxical, but the Buddhist declares that it is possible to do. The Eightfold Path is the way to do this. When one structures one's life on the principle of moderation through right actions, right thoughts, and right

[1]karika XXVI.7

[2]karika XXVI.9

[3]karika XXVI.10

[4]karika XXVI.11

discipline, then ignorance will be undercut. "In this way, this entire mass of suffering ceases completely."[1]

The chain of dependent arising is not a linear one, but a circular one. The above catch-22 and the seeming paradox of releasing graspings through wisdom yet gaining wisdom through releasing grasping is thus clarified. Ignorance is, it is true, presented as being the first link. This does not mean, though, that ignorance is in any way a cause of the succeeding eleven links. The chain can be seen as a series of conditions (pratyayas) influencing one another in succession, but this is just a way of explaining it. All links of the chain arise dependently. When there is the first link, ignorance, then the twelfth link, suffering and death, necessarily will follow. When there is the twelfth link, death will lead to rebirth, and the first link will follow. Both the origin and the means of escape from the entire chain are to be found in this mutually-conditioned and interdependent arising.

4.3.15. Section 27 — Conclusion: Right and Wrong Views

Nagarjuna has now completed his examination of the Buddha's philosophy. He has discussed all manner of improper theories and has concluded with a short but comprehensive recapitulation of the Buddha's central guiding teaching: the nature of the cycle of arising and suffering and the way to eliminate this cycle of binding influence through a cultivation of wisdom. He now closes the treatise with one last warning against unnecessary theorizing.

Section twenty-seven, "Examination of Views," can be elucidated by a brief excursus of one element of the Buddha's doctrine. The first two limbs of the Eightfold Path are Right Thought and Right Understanding. There are definite and specific ways of thinking which must be cultivated if one is to escape suffering, and these are the Buddha's teachings. However, the Buddha also stressed that certain types of speculation are deleterious, as exemplified by the metaphor of the man shot with an arrow. These are the metaphysical questions regarding the ultimate natures of things, which questions he would offer no comment on. They are referred to as the Avyakrta, the "Unanswerables," or the "questions which tend not to edification." An episode from an early sutra will best explain these "Unanswerables" and the Buddha's attitude towards them. The following episode is summarized and paraphrased.

A certain monk approached the Buddha and spoke as follows:

"Sir, it just occurred to me, as I was in meditation, that you have

---

[1]karika XXVI.12

left unelucidated, and set aside, and rejected certain theories — that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that the saint exists after death, that the saint does not exist after death, or both, or neither. If you know the answersto these questions, then tell me. If not, then admit that you do not know. If you do not give me an answer, then I will cease to be a Buddhist."

"O monk, did I ever say to you, 'Come, lead the religious life under me, and I will answer these questions?"'

"No."

"In the same way as the man shot with the arrow, O monk, the man who refuses to live the religious life until I have answered these questions, that man would die before I have answered them. The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal… not eternal… The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is finite… infinite. The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the soul and the body are identical… are different. The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the saint exists after death… does not… both… neither. Bear in mind always what it is that I have elucidated, and what it is that I have not elucidated. I have only taught those things which have to do with the fundamentals of religion, facilitate quiescence and cessation of passions, and lead to nirvana."[1]

These "unanswerables," which are found in many places in the early texts, treat the four basic questions of the temporal duration of the universe, the spatial extension of it, the future life of the Tathagata, and the relation between the body and the soul. The questions represent the most basic and deepest insecurities held by unenlightened persons, and all stem ultimately from a belief in the self and a fear of its dissolution. They are enumerated variously as ten or fourteen,[2] but this variance is due to no more than how many "either," "or," "both," or "neither" alternatives are given for each of the four. Besides the Buddha's refusal to provide specific solutions to these problems, as recounted above, there were also times when, after having been asked such questions, he would simply not speak.

Discussion of the unanswerablesand the famous "silence of the Buddha" has been a popular topic in modern scholarship, and four main

---

[1]The complete episode can be found in Warren, 117-122

[2] Murti is apparently incorrect in saying that "they are invariably enumerated as fourteen." Cf. Murti 1960, 36 and Warren, 117-122

theories have been proposed to explain his refusal to provide answers. These must be presented briefly now, for Nagarjuna's treatment of the unanswerables does not seem to fit neatly any of the four. First, it has been said that the Buddha was silent because he was interested only in practical matters. The speculative metaphysics were, simply, less important than living the proper life, and thus were set aside. A second interpretation is that the Buddha frankly did not know the answers, and was preeminently an agnostic. This was the initial suspicion of the monk in the above parable. Third, an opposite interpretation of agnosticism is that the Buddha did know the answers, but was incapable of explaining them. This interpretation is partially supported by the number of times the Buddha emphasized the subtlety and abstruseness of the doctrine. Following his enlightenment he seriously considered not even attempting to teach his new- found truths, only because he despaired of anyone understanding. [1] However, to say that the difficulty of teaching motivated the Buddha's reticence to speak is not to do him justice. Surely such an enlightened being would be able to wield language to make it do his bidding. Further, it is stated clearly in the discourses that the Buddha did have the ability to tailor his use of language to fit his audiences. A fourth approach is to say that the problem lies in the mental processes which give rise to such questions. What is important is, not an answer or the lack of an answer to these questions, but rather completely removing oneself from such a sphere of ratiocination by the appeasement of reifying thoughts.[2]

These four might or might not be correct, and they might not even be incompatible, but neither are they Nagarjuna's direct approach. Nagarjuna, simply, says that the answers to these questions are wrong. There may be theoretical reasons for rejecting the unanswerable questions, and there certainly are pragmatic reasons for not becoming entangled in such speculation. However, Nagarjuna's primary reason for rejecting them in his final section is none of these. He simply rejects them because they do not hold up to logical scrutiny.

Nagarjuna opens with a discussion of views about eternalism. All views of the survival of the self are based on the belief that the self existed in the past and /or that the self will exist in the future. However, it would not be appropriate to say that the self existed in the past, for this would require that the self who existed in the past is identical with the self

[1]"[The enlightenment] won by me is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand," the Buddha thought on the night of his awakening. "…For human beings this would be a matter difficult to see… If I were to teach [it] and others were not to understand me, that would be a weariness to me, that would be a vexation to me." (quoted in Kalupahana 1986, 336)

[2] For a more complete discussion of this, see Gadjin M. Nagao, "The Silence of the Buddha and its Madhyamic Interpretation," in Nagao 1991, 35-50

who exists now, in the present. This has already been refuted in section eleven. However, the Buddha also said that it is incorrect to say that the self is not eternal. If the Buddha had denied continuity of existence, then, as discussed above, morality would be undercut, for "the fruit of action performed by one will be experienced by another."[1] This was discussed in section seventeen. Further, a self that existed in the present but not in the past would be uncaused, which would be an erroneous conclusion. Since neither of the above alternatives is appropriate, it would certainly not be appropriate to combine them and say that one both existed and did not exist in the past. Further, since there are no other alternatives besides existence or not existence, and since a middle ground between the two would be unintelligible, it is not appropriate to say that one neither existed nor did not exist in the past. Views regarding a future existence are to be treated in the same way. That which leads to the asking of the above unanswerable questions is the tendency to seek for some "thing," some real entity which can be characterized in terms of existence or non- existence. But, "if it is thought that there is nothing eternal, what is it that will be non-eternal, both eternal and non-eternal, and also what is separated from these two [i.e. 'neither']?"[2]

Nagarjuna next addresses the issue of the relation between the soul and the body by focusing on grasping, for it is grasping which causes the belief in self-hood. There is certainly an appearance of continuous selfhood. This illusion arises from the agglomeration of the aggregates, but it is only dispositions and grasping that cause one to see a self in the aggregates. "When it is assumed that there is no self separated from grasping, grasping itself would be the self. Yet, this is tantamount to saying that there is no self."[3] But, he cautions, this does not mean that there is a self different from grasping. The self, then, "is neither different from grasping nor identical with it."[4] What has been refuted here is any natural existential status of the self, not the self as it has come to be in those who grasp. "A self does not exist. Yet, it is not the case that a person who does not grasp does not exist. This much is certain."[5] That is, when there is grasping, there is a belief in selfhood, and a self comes to be. Nagarjuna's point is that this self is not ultimately real.

One may object that perhaps there are forms of "subtle existence" which do not face the above problems. The Buddha did allow for the pos-

---

[1]karika XXVII.11

[2]karika XXVII.20

[3]karika XXVII.5

[4]karika XXVII.8

[5]karika XXVII.8

sibility of higher realms of existence, such as realms of Gods or spirits. This was a natural corollary of the doctrine of rebirth, for one living the Eightfold Path may improve his or her station but not achieve the final enlightenment which would obviate further existences. This person would then have to be reborn, but would be reborn in a better world. However, these divine spheres of reality, while better, were still not eternal and ultimately no more satisfactory than the human sphere. Nagarjuna devotes three verses to clarifying the fact that divine existences share the same limitations as human existence.

The thoughts of the soul's eternity or lack thereof were negated above, and now Nagarjuna negates thoughts of the universe's temporal eternity or lack thereof and its spatial infinity or lack thereof. The popular metaphor of candle flames is here used to illustrate the nature of the universe's existence. If the flame of one candle is used to ignite the wick of another candle, and then that newly-ignited candle is used to ignite a third one, then there is the appearance of a flame passing from one candle on to the next. It cannot be said that there is one identical flame passing on, for it is burning on different wicks, using different fuel sources, and in different times. Yet neither can there said to be three different flames, for there is an obvious continuity from one to the next. In the same way are the elements of which the universe is composed. The universe cannot be said to end, because continuity is observed in the series of dependently-arising elements. Nor can it be said to endure, because each entity in each moment is composed of different elements. Finally, the spatial extension of the universe cannot be theorized about in any way. "It is not possible to assert either the finite or the infinite," Nagarjuna concludes.[1]

Nagarjuna has thus far dealt with three of the four unanswerable subjects: the duration of the self, the relation of the self and the body, and the temporal duration and spatial extension of the universe. What was left out of this section was a discussion of the fourth unanswerable, the posthumous existence or nonexistence of the Tathagata. It may be noted that each of the above topics was dealt with in earlier sections. It is not entirely clear why he brought them up again in the final section, but two options come to mind. First, while the first three topics appear repeatedly in the previous twenty-six sections, they were usually mentioned in passing. There was as yet not a unified treatment of each one on its own. This would also explain why a discussion of the fourth unanswerable was left out of this section: Nagarjuna did devote an entire section to the nature of the Tathagata, and it did not need to be treated again. Second, it is likely that Nagarjuna felt that the tendency to speculate on these matters was so

[1]karika XXVII.28

deeply ingrained in most people and the speculations so misguided that it was worthwhile to refute them in summary one last time. This view is supported by the statement with which Nagarjuna closes the Mulamadhyamakakarika: "I reverently bow to Gautama [the Buddha] who, out of compassion, has taught the true doctrine in order to relinquish all views." [1] According to Nagarjuna, then, the Buddha's teachings were wholly for the sake of precluding metaphysical speculations and providing guidelines as to what types of views are appropriate.

Thus ends Nagarjuna's major and most influential work. One may perhaps wish that it ended on a clearer note: the final two sections and, especially, the final verse seem to raise far more confusion than they settle. Perhaps, though, this is not a bad thing. The obscurity of the karika provides for good thesis topics for those students needing them.

[1] karika XXVII.30

Chapter 5. The Philosophy of Madhyamika

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to present and explain the main themes of each section of Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika. It is hoped that this was accomplished with clarity, and that the reader now has a cursory grasp of the karika, its themes, and its method of argumentation.

The reasons for and implications of focusing solely on the karika to present Madhyamika thought should be repeated here. This work represents the core of the entire school. Though Nagarjuna wrote somewhere between thirteen and one hundred other texts, and though his commentators were numerous and disparate, and though the possible interpretations of the meaning and intent of Madhyamika thought are quite varied, nonetheless one can point to this work as being both the sole cornerstone of the school's philosophy and the vital influence which literally provided the school with its very life-breath. Choosing this work alone may present a limited understanding of the mind and intent of Nagarjuna (e.g. it will shed no light on the question of whether Nagarjuna was a Theravadin or a Mahayanist) and it certainly will not illuminate the subsequent developments of Madhyamika thought in all its variety. What a focus on this work alone will provide is the purest and cleanest possible presentation of the fundamentals of the school.[1]

A disclaimer must be forwarded in advance: it must be cautioned that any exposition of Nagarjuna's thought ultimately must be somewhat tentative. The terse form of the treatise's verses, their often cryptic quality, and the subtlety of the thought of both the Buddha and Nagarjuna all conspire to prevent any final certainties about what exactly Nagarjuna's philosophy was. Moreover, it is not always clear which of Nagarjuna's verses were meant to be an opponent's position which he then refuted, and which represented Nagarjuna's own position. Translators and interpreters of the karika, ancient and modern, frequently disagree on whether any specific verse is meant to be the right view being defended or the wrong view being negated. The above difficulties have not prevented books from being written which claim to offer definitive interpretations of Nagarjuna and Madhyamika — on the contrary, it seems that most commentaries and studies have claimed to be conclusive. Such allegations of

[1]The Buddhist tradition agrees that this is the place of this treatise, for the work became known as "The Fundamentals of the Middle [Way]."

certainty must be suspected even if only because the studies in question often have arrived at quite diverse interpretations. This necessary caveat aside, a discussion of the main elements and significances of Madhyamika thought as expressed in the karika will now be offered.

The primary themes of Madhyamika thought as detailed in the karika are three: the refutation of self-nature (svabhava), the examination of dependent arising pratitya samutpada), and the teaching of emptiness sunyata). These three are implicitly examined throughout the entire treatise, but were never isolated and scrutinized on their own. There was, it is true, a separate section devoted to each of self-nature and dependent arising, but these sections scarcely exhausted the topics nor even attempted to explain their full significance. The reason these three were not made explicit in Nagarjuna's treatise is that they were not simply three subjects among many which he wanted to investigate. Rather, they are the very substrata on which Madhyamika is based.

Self-nature runs throughout the karika as the insidious nemesis of Buddhist philosophy. A refutation of it was the initial inspiration for this treatise, for all false philosophical positions are based on its often subtle influence. Dependent arising is the chief causal principle and is as well the shaping factor of the severe use of dialectics for which Madhyamika is so famous. It was a unique interpretation of dependent arising by Nagarjuna that provided the means by which to refute self-nature. Interpreting causation in such a way as to preclude self- nature led Nagarjuna to emphasize emptiness, the concept for which he is most famous. If no entities, events, or personalities have self-nature, then they are "empty." Emptiness is the closest that the otherwise apophatic Madhyamika comes to advancing a doctrinal tenet. It is the only possible description of the ontological status of the world, and it is as well the sword which the Madhyamika uses to slash through all false views and counter all opposition. (Dependent arising is not a cataphatic assertion: it is a description, an abstract theory.) Now that a broad outline of the karika and its surface themes has been presented, these three all-pervading and heretofore largely tacit topics may be examined. Their significance will be shown to be profound and subtle and their ramifications vast.

Chapter 6. Nagarjuna's Motivation and Mission

6.1. The Dedicatory Verses

Nagarjuna appears to have been motivated by two factors. First, certain interpretations of the Buddha's teachings had been proposed with which he disagreed. A careful reading of the karika points to the notion of self-nature as being his primary focus. This was not simply a metaphysical doctrine which Nagarjuna disagreed with. The notion of self-nature with all its ramifications would have far-reaching repercussions on the Buddha's philosophy, calling into question the applicability of the Eightfold Path, the veracity of the four Noble Truths, and the attainability of nirvana. The second motivation both caused and explains the first — Nagarjuna was a devout Buddhist. It was paramount to him to defend the Buddha's teaching against all misinterpretations, to clarify the teachings for his fellow Buddhists, and to spread the teaching to those outside the community.[1]

It cannot be stressed too much that Nagarjuna was, first and foremost, a Buddhist. This devotional attitude does not necessarily shed light on the philosophy of Madhyamika, but it was the dominant reason for Nagarjuna to write the treatise. The karika opens with a two-verse dedication to the Buddha, it contains almost twenty direct invocations of the Buddha variously extolled as the Supreme Ascetic, the Victorious One, the Perfectly Enlightened One, and the Blessed One, and it closes with Nagarjuna saying "I reverently bow to Gautama who, out of compassion, has taught the true doctrine."[2]

This aspect of Nagarjuna seems to be overlooked curiously often by

[1]The rather antinomian character of much of later Buddhism tends to disguise these two aspects of early Buddhism which many Buddhists today, especially in America, would find unappealing: One, the Buddha's teaching was basically fundamentalist in requiring "right views" before any thing else. The only right view is the Saddharma, the Buddha's "True Law." Granted, the right view is a "moderate" view, but this does not negate its dogmatism. Two, Buddhism was one of the most missionary- and conversion-oriented religions in world history, second only to Christianity. (On the latter, cf. Kulke and Rothermund, 64-67) Nagarjuna's devotional attitude and his dedicatory verses of the karika will be discussed first, and a detailed treatment of self-nature will follow.

[2]karika XXVII.30

modern scholars. His work tends to be treated as a philosophical system based on ratiocination and expounded solely for the purpose of clearing up misunderstandings. This is true, but it is not the whole picture. Nagarjuna's frequent homages to the Buddha display his devotional attitude, and the volume of hymns and devotional literature attributed to him demonstrate that the Buddhist tradition did not see him in such a purely philosophical light. He was also seen as an apologist motivated by faith and greatly concerned with the dissemination of the Buddha's word.

Nagarjuna's religious piety and his trenchant philosophy are in no way contradictory. This harmony between his faith and his intellect is expressed by the two dedicatory verses with which he opens the karika:

"I salute him, the fully-enlightened, the best of speakers, who preached the non-ceasing and the non-arising, the non- annihilation and the non-permanence, the non-identity and the non- difference, the non-appearance and the non-disappearance, the dependent arising, the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious."[1]

This introduction demonstrates, not only that Nagarjuna's faith and intellect are not contradictory, but that they are complementary. The soteriological path of the Buddha both explains and engenders the rational dialectical philosophy of Nagarjuna.

These laconic verses may at first sight seem to express little more than a simple rejection of extremes. In actuality, their significance is great, for they summarize, in a mere eighteen words (in Sanskrit), the entirety of the Madhyamika philosophical approach. All of the philosophical aspects contained in these verses have been or will be discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis. Notwithstanding, since Nagarjuna saw fit to state them in a preview to his work, so shall they be briefly explained here.

First, the Buddha is extolled as the fully enlightened (sambuddhah). This, obviously, immediately tells the reader what religious system is going to be explained in the following treatise, but it also encapsulates the soteriological goal, "full enlightenment." The Buddha is then credited with preaching the "non- ceasing" and the "non-arising" and, later, "dependent arising." These three terms state a sort of table of contents, but their significance is far greater. They detail, in a mere three words, the full Madhyamika interpretation of dependent arising. Early Buddhist schools saw dependent arising as the mutual conditioning of interrelated elements and events. These elements and events were seen as being mutually conditioned but still real in themselves. The Madhyamika school gave a wholly new twist to dependent arising, stating that, if mutually

[1]karika, introductory verses

conditioned, elements and events can not be real. Things are thus not explained by ceasing and arising, but are characterized as non-ceasing and non-arising. Seen this way, one could almost call Nagarjuna's theory "non-dependent non-arising." The fact that the normal casual order is reversed in this pair further foreshadows the subversionary method so peculiar to Madhyamika. Two more pairs flesh out Nagarjuna's interpretation of dependent arising: "non- annihilation and non-permanence" and "non-appearance and non- disappearance." As things arise dependently, they cannot have any real temporal location. They cannot be annihilated, for they were never really originated. Nor can they be permanent, for this would require that they have self-nature, an assertion that does not withstand logical analysis. The perceiving and conceptual reifying faculties of the individual are illuminated by the non-appearance and non-disappearance of things. This pair shows that the existence of things is illusory, and hence any perceptions of them are evanescent and imputations of existence to them are false. Any conceptions that are held must be based on thoughts of identity and difference. E.g., "I" am different from this "desk" which is front of me; only thus can there be a subject relating to it as a different object. Further, I know that there is a "me," for I have identity — the me who existed last night is identical to the me who exists today. Since the Buddha taught "non-identity and non-difference," all such thoughts are wrong. Finally, these introductory verses point out the means of salvation, which are "the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious." By abandoning clinging to obsessions, that is, one finds the auspicious, the good (siva). One finds enlightenment. The fact that Nagarjuna did not state his dedication to the Buddha and then follow it separately with the above summary of Madhyamika thought shows that his devotional attitude and his philosophical agenda are wholly intertwined.

6.2. Self-Nature Theories

The concept of self-nature, svabhava, has been repeatedly discussed in passing in the above three chapters. It has not yet been examined in isolation because Nagarjuna did not present a single, comprehensive presentation of it in the karika. He did devote section fifteen to an "Examination of Self-nature," but this presentation of it was not exhaustive. In it he only discussed three aspects of self- nature theories: the character of svabhava as necessarily non-made and independent (karika XV.1-3), the fact that svabhava cannot be related to thoughts of existence or non-existence (XV.4-5, 8-11), and the incompatibility of svabhava with the Buddha's

teachings (XV.6-7).

The full significance of self-nature is hinted at by the fact that the karika can be seen as being structured around a discussion of self-nature. The first fourteen sections of the treatise dealt mostly with refutations of certain Realist interpretations of the elements and factors comprising objective, external reality. For example, examinations in the first half of the work were of causes and conditions pratyayas), elements, action, and the conglomerating relations and forces. The placement of this important section near the middle of the treatise, instead of at the beginning, hints that a clarification and refutation of self- nature concludes this examination of the elements and factors of reality. The sections of the treatise following this seem to deal more with an examination of the individual and his or her internal subjective reality. For example, examinations following it are of bondage and release, self and time, enlightenment and hindrances thereto, and right and wrong views. It was necessary for Nagarjuna to have refuted notions of self- nature before he could examine these latter issues.

6.3. Non-Buddhist Notions of Self-Nature and the Soul

The three aspects of self-nature theories discussed in section fifteen seemingly were chosen because they were of the most direct relevance in the theories Nagarjuna was refuting and the teachings he was upholding in the treatise. What he did not discuss, then, and for obvious reasons, was a more sympathetic account of self-nature, i.e. the reasons it was formulated as a concept in the first place, what the theory meant, and what problems it solved. The concept had a long history of usage and a variety of meanings throughout that history. There were definite reasons for some schools of thought, Buddhist and otherwise, to posit self-nature. Further, there are more significances of the concept which Nagarjuna did not as explicitly touch upon; these significances were only implicit in his refutation of the concept. A brief discussion of the history of the concept, reasons for its assertion, and its significance needs to be taken up now. This is not an irrelevant aside, but is important for two reasons. First, a fuller understanding of self-nature theories will shed greater light on Nagarjuna's enterprise. Second, it will demonstrate the ground for his philosophy. The two most important concepts of Nagarjuna's philosophy, dependent arising and emptiness, will only make sense against the backdrop of the theories he was criticizing.

One cannot point to a conclusive beginning of self-nature theories. Surely, they were first posited whenever individuals reflected on the fact that there is a causal regularity between events and an apparent continuity

of identity in individuals and things. By the time of the early classical period in India, two distinct camps of self-nature theories had become clear: those of orthodox Hinduism, and those of the three heterodoxical systems of Materialism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

The central fact agreed upon by almost all of Hinduism is the reality of an eternal, immutable, immanent soul, the atman. This led Hinduism to assert the reality of self-nature in one form or another. For example, Aghamarsana, one of the earliest Hindu philosophers, considered "warmth" to be the first creative principle. From this primal warmth originated, respectively, law, truth, darkness, water, time, and finally the physical universe.[1] The Sankhya-Yoga system later postulated a general material principle (prakrti) which was the primal cause of the universe and from which all else evolved. Theistic interpretations of the above posited a primum mobilum which initiated the causal process, and non-theistic interpretations declared that the primal matter contained an inherent energy which obviated the need for a primum mobilum.[2] Either way, though, it was clear that the omnipresence and the eternality of the soul declared that nothing really new could come into existence; all change was, in some form or another, based on self-nature.[3]

The "Materialist" philosophies of the early classical period were even more clear about the reality and function of self-nature, for they denied the existence both of controlling, inner soul and of a transcendent primum mobilum. "Without doubt," says Kalupahana, "it was the Materialists who first put forward a systematic theory of inherent nature svabhava)."[4] Since the regularity of causation could be attributed neither to a God nor to an inner soul, only inherent self- nature could be invoked to account for it. This self-nature became elevated to the status of fixed, universal law: self-nature is the only determinant of and force behind causation. Since self-nature took the place of both the soul and God for the Materialists, they were often grouped under the broad heading of Svabhavavada, the "School of Self-nature."[5] Generally speaking, they held that only matter is real. Any forms of life or consciousness are byproducts of material forces, the theory of hylozoism. These material elements have an inherent nature which manifests itself in a fixed pattern of causation. Since sentience is epiphenomenal and self-nature invariable, free will is

---

[1]Kalupahana 1975, 6

[2]ibid., 7

[3]The Nyaya-Vaisesika theory of asatkaryvada is not an exception to this, for the effect, while empirically a new creation, is nonetheless potential in and hence inherent in the cause. Cf. Hiriyanna, 239

[4]Kalupahana 1975, 28

[5]cf. Hiriyanna, 103- 106

necessarily an illusion.

The main difference between Hindu svabhava and Materialist svabhava boils down to morality. First, the Hindu was more transcendental. The eternal all-pervasiveness of atman required that nothing really new come into existence — causal change was always ultimately superficial. The Hindu tradition emphasized the spiritual quality of ultimate reality, a corollary of which was that morality is real. One's action determined one's fate, and so it was paramount to make causality and self-nature two halves of the same coin. The Bhagavad- Gita summarizes well the connections between self- nature and morality in Hinduism. Its final chapter states clearly that each person has a self-nature which determines his or her duties in life. Each of the four castes is said to have its own intrinsic nature, svabhava, which prescribes specific duties incumbent upon each person. One can only obtain freedom by properly living out and manifesting one's svabhava.[1] The Materialist recognizes no such transcendent self-nature, for self- nature is a blind physical force found in the material elements only. Religion then boils down only to morality, and morality in turn reduces to simple hedonism. One text defines heaven as nothing more than "eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes," etc.[2] , in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 235 Certain Materialists did at least elevate morality to include cultural cultivation, discipline, and education, but this was for no other reason but to develop a greater capacity to enjoy the world's delights.[3]

Jainism, whose founder was a contemporary of the Buddha, adopted a middle ground between the above two opposing theories. The Hindus held a modalistic philosophy; they saw the universe as nothing but modes of the living atman. The Materialists saw the universe as nothing but manifestations of non-living matter. The Jains attempted to reconcile the two by postulating a living being with a soul acting in a universe comprised of non-living matter, space and fate (karma). Both permanence (spirit) and change (matter) are equally real. This led to what seems to be the rather confusing doctrine that "things are partly determined and partly undetermined," that both determinism and free will are real and operative.[1] As might be expected from this, they attempted to both accept and

[1]Cf. Bhagavad-Gita, XVIII.40-48

[2]Sarvasiddhantasamgraha 9

[3]Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, An Introduction to Indian Philosophy (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1960), 69 Morality is further obviated by the complete absence of free will in certain of these Materialist systems. The text quoted above declares that even one's potential for pleasure is determined by the lifeless self-nature: "A person is happy or miserable through [the laws of] nature: there is no other cause."[4] , in Radhakrishnan and Moore, 235

[4]Sarvasiddhantasamgraha 4

deny self-nature. This was accomplished by asserting that, on one hand, individual human exertion was capable of effecting change. On the other hand, past extrinsic karma caused the individual to become associated with a deterministic type of self-nature.

6.4. The Buddha's Theory of Soul-lessness

The Buddhist theory of self-nature, both in its original formulation and its later developments, is unlike any of the above three. There are few references to self- nature to be found in the early Buddhist writings. This is not because the Buddha was unaware of or was ignoring the issue, but because he saw self- nature as included in the larger issue of selfhood (atman) as a whole. About this, he had very clear teachings. Any ideas of self are false and imaginary beliefs which have no objective ground. Further, the illusory beliefs in self-hood are the direct cause of selfishness, craving, and greed. "In short," says Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula, "to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world."[2] However, and this is crucial, the Buddha also taught that one must not conceive of the self as non-existent. He clearly stated that there is no self, but he did not intend for this to be interpreted as a negation of something that once existed.

An anecdote will explain this apparent ambivalence between denying and asserting the soul. The Buddha was once asked by his disciple Vacchagottagotta whether or not there was a self. The Buddha declined to answer, and the disciple left. He later explained his refusal to respond:

"If I had answered 'There is a self,' [that would not have been] in accordance with my knowledge that all things are without self… If I had answered 'There is no self,' then that would have been a greater confusion to the already confused Vacchagottagotta. For he would have thought: 'Formerly indeed I had a self, but now I haven't got one.'"[3] The Buddha's dilemma is the same as that presented by the famous, albeit distasteful, joke from Western philosophy: "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" As soon as one attempts to answer the question, one is forced to give misleading information. The only escape is to refrain from answering.

The Buddha was thus careful not to be too adamant about either answer. Saying that there is a self would lead people to interpret him as being eternalist, i.e. asserting the eternal atman of Hinduism. The moral

---

[1]Kalupahana 1975, 50

[2]Rahula, 51

[3]quoted in ibid., 62-3.

result of eternalism is selfishness and, ultimately, excessive desires. Saying that there is no self would lead people to interpret him as being annihilationist, i.e. denying any sort of self-hood in the same way that the Materialists denied it. The moral result of annihilationism is a state of distress over losing that which one believes one now has and, further, annihilationism would undermine moral accountability. Neither could the Buddha say that there both is and is not a soul, for that would echo the Jaina theory. Morally, he probably saw the Jaina fatalistic determinism as another threat to accountability; if one's nature and actions are determined as inexorably by previous karma as the Jains held, then the efficacy of individual initiative is greatly lessened.

A few hundred years after the Buddha's death some schools undertook the task of systematizing his ontology in the face of his teaching of anatman, soullessness. The result was the Abhidharma, a classificatory analysis of human experience into physical elements, sense- faculties, and the aggregates comprising the individual. In this process of analysis, two old pre-Buddhist theories crept back in: self-nature svabhava) and other-nature (parabhava). It was in response to these insidious heresies that Nagarjuna formulated his refutation of the two.

Theories of self-nature found their host in the Realist (Sarvastivada) school. Theories of other- nature found a host in the "Sutra School" (Sautrantika), so called because they saw themselves as being the most faithful to the original writings, the sutras. The Realists reduced all phenomena to ultimate atomistic entities. The systematization of these atoms and the relations between them was complete enough to account for all phenomenal things, events, and individuals without any recourse to theories of a transcendent self, such as atman. However, since these atoms were irreducible and discrete, both temporally and spatially, there remained a difficulty of accounting for the influencing effect of one momentary atom on another. Further, the perceived continuity of existence was not fully explained. To resolve these difficulties, the Realists asserted that each atom has its own self- nature. However, since these atoms are the ultimate building blocks of reality, and since each has self- nature, they cannot be associated with arising and ceasing. As such, they must exist in all three phases of time, past, present, and future. It is not clear how exactly the atoms can be momentary but their self-nature eternal. It seems that the phenomenal manifestation of an atom is but momentary, while the potential existence of an atom and its eternal character, its self-nature, are trans-temporal.[1] Such a self-nature may not have been explicitly contrary to the Buddha's teachings, but it seemed to other schools of

[1]Cf. Kohn, 188

Buddhism to come dangerously close to the Hindu atman-theories which the Buddha was assuredly and clearly negating.[1]

In response to these theories which seemed to border on heresy, a group of monks split off of the Realists around 150 C.E.[2] This, the "Sutra School," intended to reject the heresies of the Realists and return to the original Buddhism as found in the earliest scriptures. They denied the eternal self-nature of the otherwise momentary atoms by going to the other extreme of denying the atoms any temporal duration. They did not merely confine the atom to existence in the present alone, but literally reduced its duration to zero. A result of this nontemporal instantaneity was that the atoms could have no spatial extension, either.[3] The atoms were seen as arising and perishing in the same instant. Since the atoms partook of neither time nor space, their causal efficiency was negated. Causation was not denied, for regular continuity of phenomena was observed to exist. However, the all-but-nonexistent atoms had no such power to influence or cause. There was thus seen to be a difference between cause and effect, and the Sutra School was forced to recognize other-nature, parabhava.[4] The "other" in their other-nature was the series of atoms of which any one atom was a part. The atoms succeed one another in a contiguous, uninterrupted sequence. While no atom on its own lasts long enough to have causal efficacy, the series of atoms does last long enough to influence other atomic series.[5] It is the self-nature of one series, which series is "other" than each atom within it, that interacts with and conditions pratyayas) other series.[6]

6.5. Nagarjuna's Response

Nagarjuna's position seems to be that the above two schools were led to posit a form of self-nature because they took the Abhidharma agenda of analysis too far. By so enthusiastically making lists of all the elements and factors by which the Buddha explained reality and drawing corre-

[1]Kalupahana 1986, 32

[2]Kohn, 189

[3]Lamotte, 603

[4]Kalupahana 1986, 23

[5]Lamotte, 607

[6]The Sautrantika philosophy of instantaneity led to another, even more heretical doctrine, which, being unrelated to the topic at hand, was not mentioned above. Briefly, the Sautrantikas were another school of Personalists. If an atom is infinitesimally short-lived, then it cannot be perceived directly. The act of perception would have to be once-removed from the object of perception. Yet perception exists. To account for this, consciousness was seen as underlying and supporting all phenomena. This consciousness creates from succession the illusion of continuity. This illusion is self-conscious, and a subtle self comes to be.

spondences and relations between these factors they failed to realize that, though the Buddha explained his philosophy using such conceptions as psychophysical aggregates, material elements, and sense perceptions, he was not reifying these factors. Such elements and factors provided for a complete description of reality, but they were not intended to be taken as real. They are all dependently-arisen, not autonomous. Further, the doctrine of momentariness, as explained above, led the Realists to posit the existence of self-nature in all three phases of time and led the Sutra School to deny any temporal duration to the elements. But this notion of momentariness is not to be found in the Buddha's teachings, either. Nagarjuna's position is that, had these schools understood dependent arising in the right way, they would not have been led to hold such beliefs.

Nagarjuna's attitude towards self-nature is wholly explained by one fact: the theory of dependent arising necessarily upholds the Buddha's doctrine of soullessness (anatman), which soullessness can never be compatible with self-nature theories. The self-nature of a thing is its "identity," that which makes it unique, autonomous, and differentiable from any and every other thing. The meaning of identity can be illuminated by examples from the English language. If someone points to me and asks "Who is that?" and they are told "That is Jonah Siegel," then I have been "identified." I have been distinguished solely on the basis of my "identity." Further, this identity requires temporal identical-ness. For the person who is now reading this to have an identity, that person must at this moment be identical to the person who got out of bed this morning, and both must be identical to that person who was born one year or fifty years earlier. Identity theories therefore require that there be an enduring and unchanging substance residing within the entity, event, or individual being identified. If a substance either changed or did not endure, then it would not be identical from one moment to the next, and thus would not have identity, and thus could not be self-nature.

Nagarjuna saw that self-nature, by necessity, must have two qualities: it must be unchanging and it must be enduring. The Buddha's theory of dependent arising, however, is incompatible with such identity on both accounts. First, as explained above, self-nature must be unchanging and identical from one moment to the next. However, it would then never be associated with change, and cause-and-effect would be meaningless. "Because of the perception of change, the absence of self- nature is [recognized]," says Nagarjuna.[1] The example he used previously to deny change of identity was that a person cannot be said to age. Who is it that ages, the young person? No, for youthfulness and agedness cannot exist

[1]karika XIII.3

in the same identity. Is it the old person who ages? No, for an old person is already aged, and thus cannot again partake of the process of aging.[1] Is the person distinct from the discrete process of aging, which process is a mere temporal attribute of the enduring subject? No, for then subject and attribute would be separate and individually autonomous. Aging would exist as an abstraction apart from any thing that ages, and the subject would exist but have no association with either youthfulness nor agedness, and would thus be equally abstract. Thus, if a thing has self-nature as a sort of substance, then that thing can never participate in change or, by extension, causality. A tempting alternative would be to posit a distinction between a thing's identity and its substantial self-nature. This is wrong for two reasons. One, such a distinction is meaningless. Self-nature is identity, and vice-versa. Two, if a thing's identity and its self- nature were distinguished, then it would have to be said to have "other-nature." This is metaphysical nonsense, and Nagarjuna repeatedly makes it clear that, without self- nature, there can be no such thing as other-nature.

The second quality of self-nature is that it must be eternally enduring, for its autonomy would require that it not be causally conditioned. "The occurrence of self- nature through causes and conditions (pratyayas) is not proper," declared Nagarjuna.[2] If self-nature arose due to a cause or through the influence of conditions (pratyayas), then it would be artificial, it would be made. But "how could self-nature be made?"[3] If made, it would be at least partially dependent and self-nature, by definition, is independent. If made, its identity would be potentially or explicitly in its cause, its maker. One may object that it is still theoretically possible to declare self-nature to be eternal and unmade, and thus a real and autonomous identity. A Buddhist would say that there are two philosophical problems with such eternalism. (There is a moral one, too: see below.) One, no such unmade identity is evident. The Buddha saw that the nature of all conditioned things is transitory and he announced this transitoriness. Asserting eternalism contradicts the Buddha's enlightened observation. Two, such an eternal identity would be pure metaphysical speculation. If eternal, it would be uncaused and unconditioned, and wholly autonomous. As such, it could have absolutely no influencing effects on the rest of the universe, and so it could never be known. The theoretical denial of self-nature is further upheld by an empirical fact: self-nature is never observed to exist, and so its assertion must be pure metaphysical speculation. The very third verse in the treatise states "the self-nature of

[1] Cf. karika XIII.4

[2] karika XV.1

[3] karika XV.2

existents is not evident."[1] The Buddha, with all of his perspicacity and philosophical acuity, who was "adept in existence as well as in non-existence,"[2] said that he found there to be no substantial identity in things. Even Nagarjuna, who did not claim to have the same enlightened wisdom as the Buddha, observed the empirical evidence that self- nature is simply not found to exist. It is na vidyate, "not seen." Those who do claim to perceive immutable and eternal identity are simply myopic, filtering their perceptions through defilements, grasping, and dispositions. "Those who perceive self-nature as well as other-nature, existence as well as non-existence, they do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha's message."[3] As mentioned, a supranatural transcendent identity could be posited theoretically but, as explained above, this theory could never leave the realm of pure speculation, and so is pointless.

The final reason that Nagarjuna refuted self-nature theories is the moral one. The potential of things to change and to be changed is prerequisite for personal growth, change, and escaping from suffering. If one's substantial identity were immutable, then change would obviously be simply superficial. For one to escape suffering by changing and appeasing the defilements, self- nature must necessarily be mutable.[4] Change is not change of substance, but change of the accidentals; bondage is removable because it is extrinsic. A Madhyamika response to this likely would be that, if truly extrinsic, the adventitious elements could never really affect or bind the substance. More drastic, a person is only confined to the cycle of birth-and-death if he or she has dispositions like passionate attraction and aversion and if he or she grasps onto these passions or grasps onto existence itself. If things had self-nature, then these dispositions and graspings would themselves have self-nature. Since self- nature is unchanging, then the dispositions and grasping themselves would be permanent, unappeasable, and eternally binding. One could never break free from them, and enlightenment could never be found.[5] Finally, self-nature would be incompatible with causation, an individual's ability to effect real change would be impossible, all moral action would be nullified, and the Buddha's path would become meaningless. "If you perceive the existence of the existents in terms of self-nature, then you will… contradict [the notions of] effect, cause, agent, performance of action, activity,

[1]karika I.3

[2]karika XV.7

[3]karika XV.6

[4]The common Vedantic solution to this is that, since one's substantial nature (atman) is immutable and eternal, the defilements are but adventitious and temporal.

[5]Cf. karika XXII.9

arising, ceasing, as well as fruit [i.e. the results of moral action]," Nagarjuna concludes.[1]

[1]karika XXIV.16-17

Chapter 7. Dependant Arising, the Foundation of Madhyamika

7.1. Dependant Arising as a Central Notion in Buddhism

The Buddha's theory of dependent arising has an immediately obvious significance — it is the only positive ontological theory expounded by the Buddha. The formulations of the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are of course positive teachings, but they are not really philosophical dogmas. They are descriptions of the condition of humankind, the ultimate goal of humankind, and teachings about how to achieve that goal. Only dependent arising describes the ontic status of the universe (dependence), its mode of creation (dispositions conditioned by ignorance), its future fate (the appeasement of dispositions which reverses the cycle of arising), the ontic nature of the individual (impersonal aggregates conditioned by ignorance), and the future fate of the individual (extinction through enlightenment). Scholar Gunapala Malalasekera has expressed the status of these various formulations well in saying that "Just as the Four Noble Truths… form the heart of the Buddha's teaching, so does the doctrine of dependent arising constitute its backbone."[1]

Dependent arising was likewise of supreme importance for Nagarjuna. As explained above, Nagarjuna opened his treatise with a dedication that placed dependent arising at the center of his appreciation of the Buddha and as central for Madhyamika thought. Indeed, renowned scholar of Buddhism Gadjin Nagao has gone so far as to say that Nagarjuna "regarded Sakyamuni as the great master precisely because of his elucidation of dependent arising."[2] As with the above discussion of self-nature, a prefatory presentation of the doctrine and its development is necessary. Dependent arising is not a theory that the Buddha developed, but one that he saw. As he sat under the Bodhi tree on the night of his full awakening he discovered the fact of the mutual contingency of all existent things. This awareness led him to the "threefold knowledge" that

[1]Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera, "Aspects of Reality taught by Theravada Buddhism," in Moore, 78

[2]Gadjin M. Nagao, The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5 (italics mine)

marked his station as one who had achieved full enlightenment sambuddhah). First, he saw, through his new- found knowledge of dependent arising, the origin of suffering in ignorance and the end of suffering in wisdom. Second, fixing "his mind upon the chain of causation, in direct and reverse order,"[1] he obtained the knowledge of all of his previous existences. This provided him with the recollection of his previous actions and their karmic consequences, enabling him to see that he had lived out all of his accrued karma and that this would be his last existence. Third, having so clearly perceived the origin of the cycle, he knew with certainty that he had fully erased the binding ignorance, and would surely never return to existence. He knew himself to be "Thus Gone;" he was a Tathagata.[2]

A key to the Buddha's teaching is that he was not the only one privileged to see dependent arising. Anyone who follows the path he recommended can realize its nature and workings. More than this, individual freedom requires that one verify these truths for him- or herself. The importance of and possibility of perceiving dependent arising is exemplified by the story of the conversion of Sariputta and Moggallana related in chapter one, above: all that was needed for each of them to realize nirvana was to be told "all things that arise will cease." The duty of the Buddhist monk who is aware of the Buddha's formulation of dependent arising is to examine each of the links for him- or herself, discover how they are conditioned, how they arose, and how they can be ceased.[3] This is the key to the Buddhist path. The import of this duty is far greater than merely verifying one aspect of the Buddha's teachings. Rather, one who follows this will understand the entirety of the Buddha's teachings, his "dharma," and, more, one who follows this is guaranteed to see the Buddha himself. He once said "those who see dependent arising will see the dharma; those who see the dharma will see dependent arising," and another time he said "those who see the dharma will see me; those who see me will see the dharma."[4]

7.2. The Meaning of Dependent Arising

There are two main formulations of dependent arising, one general and the other specific. In its most abstract form, the theory holds that "That

---

[1]Mahavagga, quoted in Radhakrishnan 1929, 410

[2]Lamotte, 16-17

[3]Warder, 133

[4]Majjhima-nikaya and Samyutta- nikaya, respectively, quoted in Nagao, 1991, 104

being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises; that being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases."[1] The more specific formulation details the process by which links in the chain arise, one after the other, and which links directly influence which others. The most common of these specific formulations is the twelve-link one described in chapter two, but there are minor variations on this. The crux of all formulations of the theory is the mutual interdependence of all things. Every element is both conditioned and is a conditioner, so every element is both an effect and a cause. There is no transcendent law of cause-and-effect ruling the process, for there is only a relative "before" and "after," only a relative causal sequence. On the one hand no element is individually autonomous, and on the other hand neither is there a higher force ruling the process. Since no thing exists on its own, no thing is real in itself. A thing is dependent on another, then, not just for its identification, as "tallness" is dependent on "shortness," but for its very existence, as the piece of clothing is dependent upon the threads which constitute it.

Thus far, the doctrine of dependent arising may seem clear and obvious. If so, it is only because one does not yet understand it in all of its implications. The Buddha's attendant, ananda, once said to his master, "It is surprising, sir, it is wonderful, sir, how profound this dependent arising is and how profound is its illumination. Yet it seems to me as if very simple." "Say not so, ananda, say not so," admonished the Buddha in reply.[2] The theory is abstruse and its ramifications vast.

In the eyes of Buddhism, the doctrine of dependent arising solves all metaphysical philosophical problems. Etiology is solved because there is, not an absolute beginning, but an temporally indeterminate welling up of mutually-conditioned factors. Since no factor is temporally prior, as such, the discussions of genesis manage to avoid positing an absolute beginning without recourse either to a metaphysical entity like a transcendent God or to causal priority ad infinitum. Eschatology is solved because, since the ultimate end of existence is merely the appeasement of arising through appeasement of ignorant dispositions, there is no need to predict apocalypses or nihilistic destruction of existence. Things arose, but there was no ultimate cause, and things will cease, but there is no ultimate fate. Soteriology is likewise solved; one need not face either a final Judgment Day nor mere annihilation, but rather one will just face the self-caused abandonment of equally self-caused afflicted existence. When ignorance ceases, birth ceases, and death ceases. Karma, metempsychosis, and the nature of the soul are also all solved without recourse to abstract soul-

---

[1]Samyutta-nikaya, quoted in Harvey, 54

[2]Mahanidana Sutra, quoted in Warder, 108

theories. Karma is neither an adventitious elemental defilement, like it is for the Jains, nor a subtle and transcendental deterministic fate, like for certain schools of Hinduism. Karma is simply the correlation between cause and effect. Karma is determined by one's actions and dispositions, and when one appeases one's dispositions then, when eventually the lingering effects of prior causes have come to fruition, existence will be no more. The simple conditioning of one link by another link enables the Buddhist karma to be determined without being deterministic, and subtle without being transcendental. Reincarnation is similarly solved with no recourse to atman-theories. Death is conditioned by birth, which is in turn conditioned by ignorance. This contiguous contingency obviates the need to posit a substantial and transcendently-enduring soul. The perceived existence and continuity of the individual is likewise explained without recourse to atman: since the aggregates of the individual arise together, and these aggregates account for the entire nature of the individual, there is no need to posit an extraneous metaphysical entity like the self. The debate of free will versus determinism is also solved. There can be no "free" will, for no element of existence is independent. All things are dependent upon other things, and so is the will. This does not mean that the universe is bound by inexorable determinism: the Buddha declared himself to be an upholder of "free action,"[1] for it is one's will in the form of volitional dispositions which both caused existence in the first place and will ultimately bring about appeasement and freedom.[2] Two more theories repugnant to the Buddha, the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, are obviated by dependent arising. Nothing is eternal, for, when a thing's conditioning factors cease, then it will cease. Neither is anything destined to face destruction in non-existence for, as contingent upon other things, it was never independently real in the first place. Finally, dependent arising solves ontology. Things are empirically real, for they were arisen. However, they are not ultimately real, for there is no substance, tòn, on which they are founded. There is Becoming, but no Being. Since things are not ultimately real, the affliction of suffering can be vanquished; if suffering were ultimately real, then it could never be abolished.

The Abhidharma schools were the first to offer an interpretation of the doctrine of dependent arising, but interpretation probably was not their intent. They understood the doctrine to mean the temporal succession of momentary and discrete elements (dharmas) which were in themselves real.[1] They did not see dependent arising to mean that the elements

---

[1]Malalasekera in Moore, 80

[2]That both free will and determinism are operative in Buddhism's dependent arising is not to be confused with the compatibility of the two in Jainism. In the former, neither is ultimately real, but in the latter, both are real.

were only relatively real, but rather they saw it as describing the interactions between already-existing elements. The point of the doctrine dependent arising, they felt, was solely to negate soul-theories, not to negate the elements themselves. Dependence was thus seen as referring to the conditioning relations between the elements, which relations were meticulously analyzed and systematized. It was these relations that became seen as the dynamic force of becoming.

The Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) writings criticized the Abhidharma theory of relations as being, not an explanation of dependent arising, but an interpretation of it, and an interpretation with which they disagreed. The systematic hierarchy of relations was seen as being no less metaphysical than the speculative theories of causality which the Buddha was trying to avoid.[2] A further problem was that, while it was not explicitly wrong to describe the universe as made up of discrete elements, it was misleading. To isolate an element temporally was to take a first step towards conceptually reifying that element. The approach adopted by the Perfection of Wisdom school was to elevate the theory of dependent arising from the empirical to the conceptual by formulating a two- truth theory, a theory later embraced by Nagarjuna. This approach declared that the Abhidharma schools saw reality from the standpoint of lower, conventional truth, and so they saw all as being composed of real elements which are mutually dependent in terms of causal efficacy. The Perfection of Wisdom, on the other hand, believed themselves to have access to perfect prajna, “wisdom” (hence the name of this school, Prajnaparamita). From the standpoint of higher, ultimate truth afforded by such wisdom, elements were seen as being, not just causally conditioned, but even ontologically conditioned. That is, the elements did not merely constitute conglomerate things which, as an assemblage, had no inherent identity and real existence; moreover, rather, the elements themselves had no inherent identity or real existence.

The result of this interpretation of dependent arising is that the elements are “empty;” as dependent arisen, they are not real and are without self-nature. Furthermore, concepts, too, are unreal.[3] All concepts are based on dualities as “tallness” is dependent on “shortness.” The ultimate implication of this interpretation is a shift from emphasis on logical reasoning, as evidenced in the Abhidharma, to non-dual intuition, or prajna. This non-dual intuition prefigured Nagarjuna’s use of comprehensive four-fold negations and the later mysticism of Zen.[1] In the writings of

---

[1]Santina, 6

[2]Cf. Kalupahana 1975, 154-155

[3]Santina, 12

both the Perfection of Wisdom school and Nagarjuna, all propositions regarding a subject are negated (e.g. something is, is not, both is and is not, neither is nor is not), but no alternative proposition is offered. The only way to grasp the subject is through non-dual, non-conceptual intuition.

7.3. Madyamika Interpretation and Re-interpretation

The Perfection of Wisdom school of thought was to have so great an influence on Nagarjuna that he was even credited with having founded the school.[2] Indeed, his interpretation of dependent arising is identical with that of the Perfection of Wisdom. However, while in the former this interpretation of dependent arising was pervasive but implicit, Nagarjuna fleshed it out and gave systematization to its implications. In doing so, the notion of dependent arising became radically different and more profound than it had been in its earlier incarnations. It has been argued that Nagarjuna instigated a "Copernican revolution" in both Buddhism and Indian philosophy as a whole by expanding the meaning of dependent arising from being mere elemental relations to defining a full dialectical method.[3] This may or may not be the case — it is in no way clear that Nagarjuna was revolutionizing the philosophy of the Buddha as the Buddha meant it — but it is certainly true that Nagarjuna's interpretation of dependent arising was wholly unlike that of the Buddhism which preceded him.

Briefly, Nagarjuna's interpretation of dependent arising of elements focused on the nature of each element on its own. He found that nothing can be conceptualized in isolation, but neither can it be conceptualized in association. Two things, if dependently arisen, can be neither identical nor different. Yet, the concept of relation requires that they be both identical and different.[4] They must be identified as separate, for, if not separate, one cannot speak of their relating. A thing cannot interact with itself; plurality is required. Conversely, they must be identified as not being different, for, to relate, they must have a connection. If truly separated, then they can never interact. Water, for example, cannot interact with burning, and fire cannot interact with freezing. "In identity," Nagarjuna points out, "there is no co- existence. That which is associated does not arise together." That is, if identical, the "co-" of "co-existence" is mean-

[1]On the latter, cf. Shunryu Suzuki, "No Dualism," in Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), 41-43

[2]Cf. chapter three

[3]Cf. Murti, 1960, 123-4 and 274.

[4]ibid., 138

ingless. Dependent arising requires two distinct elements for there to be relation and hence arising. Yet, on the other hand, "in discreteness, how can there be co- existence?"[1] That is, if separate, the "co-" doesn't apply, either, and the relation that is required for arising is again precluded. The only conclusion is that "whatever arises depending on whatever, that is not identical nor different from it."[2]

One cannot avoid the above difficulty by positing a type of causality that is other than dependent arising, such as eternalism or simple phenomenalism. Things cannot be eternally existing and hence unarisen for, if they had an eternal identity, then they would be devoid of change, devoid of action, devoid of all phenomenality, and hence meaningless in their metaphysicality. Neither can there be a type of causality in which things are temporally new phenomenal creations for, if the effect is discrete from its cause, then ultimately it is not connected to the cause and hence is uncaused. Dependent arising, which explains causation without recourse either to eternalism or to simple phenomenalism, is the only coherent theory. As Nagarjuna says in relation to agent and action, a cause proceeds depending upon its effect and the effect proceeds depending on the cause. "We do not perceive any other way of establishing [them]," he says.[3]

The main complication in thinking of things as independent is self- nature, svabhava. Any thing that is dependently arisen, Nagarjuna said, must be without self-nature, incapable of being isolated and, ultimately, not even real. Maria Ruth Hibbets, a recent thesis student of Madhyamika, has clarified the incompatibility of self- nature and relativity with a most apt analogy. Seeking to discover the essential meaning of a word, i.e. its one true and unique meaning, one looks up the word in a dictionary. Here one finds a series of relations, e.g. X is like Y, unlike Z, etc. Still wanting to pinpoint the word's identity, one looks up the secondary relational words Y and Z, where entirely new sets of relations are given. One could continue ad nauseam and never find the word's essence, its svabhava. It is only defined in relation to other words, all of which are likewise without self- nature.[4] The constituents of existence are both brought into manifestation and defined in the same way — they have neither essential nor empirical independence, but can only arise and be defined in relation to other constituents. Had the earlier Buddhists not analyzed reality into

---

[1]karika VI.4

[2]karika XVIII.10

[3]karika VIII.12

[4]Maria Ruth Hibbets, "An Investigation into the Negative Dialectics of Nagarjuna and Candrakirti" (Bachelor's thesis, Reed College, 1991), 20

discrete momentary elements, Nagarjuna likely would not have responded by so drastically disproving the reality of elements in themselves. It was in the light of these self-nature theories that he responded with this teaching of relativity. If all things are dependently arisen, then they are not arisen independently, on their own. If not arisen on their own, then they cannot be said to exist on their own. This is identical to the Buddha's formulation of dependent arising as explained above: their conceptual distinction is relative as "tallness" depends on "shortness," and, further, their very ontological existence depends on relative arising, as fire cannot exist without fuel and fuel cannot exist without fire. The only reason for Nagarjuna to repeat the Buddha's doctrine, then, was to negate the misconception of self-nature that had arisen since the Buddha's time.

The shift in emphasis from mere elemental relativity to both ontological and conceptual relativity is exemplified by the exegesis of the term pratitya-samutpada, dependent arising, by two Buddhist philosophers. The Abhidharma notion of momentary elements required that the universe at each moment be quantitatively and qualitatively a new creation. With this understanding, a proponent of the Realist school, Srilabha, interpreted the term with the following etymology:

"Pratitya denotes the sense of momentary destruction and it qualifies the term samutpada as a derivative adjective. 'Prati + iti + yat,' which means 'fit to disappear in every succeeding moment.' [sic] The suffix yat connotes 'fitness,' iti means 'perishing,' 'destruction,' 'annihilation,' 'cessation.' The prefix prati is used, according to [the Abhidharmas], in the sense of repetition. They mean by 'pratitya-samutpada,' 'origination by repetitive destruction.'"[1]

The insight afforded by this exegesis is that the Abhidharma saw dependent arising as just the interplay of relations between real elements, which elements enjoy ephemeral but real manifestation. Candrakirti, a later commentator on Nagarjuna, disagrees with the interpretation of those "who hold that the term means the arising of things which vanish in the moment. This is bad etymology," he says.[2] A note may be added here. It may not be clear why the Abhidharma theory of elements requires that an element be destroyed after its momentary "flash" of existence. The reason is two-fold. First, they held that a cause must cease utterly before its effect could manifest, or cause and effect would overlap. This would allow there to be at least one moment in which an element is still being caused while its effect has already materialized. Two, a change in

---

[1]Ramendranath Ghose, The Dialectics of Nagarjuna (Allahabad, India: Vohra Publishers and Distributors, 1987), 183, quoted in ibid., 34

[2]Prasannapada in Sprung, 34.

time must be a change in identity; if a thing lasted two moments with the same identity, then it would endure, and, by extension, could be eternal. To counter this "bad etymology," Candrakirti offers his own:

"The root i means motion; the preposition prati means the arrival or attainment. But the addition of a preposition alters the meaning of the root… So, in this case, the word pratitya, as gerund, means 'attained' in the sense of dependent or relative. Again, the verbal root pad [to go] preceded by the preposition samut [out of] means to arise or to become manifest. The full meaning of the term pratitya-samutpada is therefore the arising, or becoming manifest of things in relation to or dependent on causal conditions pratyayas)."[1]

The above two exegeses may not seem contradictory and, indeed, the only obvious difference is that Srilabha's etymology mentions both arising and ceasing, while Candrakirti's focuses only on arising. The important differences are those between the underlying assumptions, which assumptions can be gleaned from the quotes. The Abhidharma interpretation of dependent arising is little more than the interaction of distinct parts to form new wholes. The Madhyamika interpretation, as hinted at by Candrakirti, is more radical. It is not just that composite things which are made up of momentary parts are arisen depending on the parts and have new identities in each time- moment. More, the parts themselves have no real existence outside of the mutual interaction which causes them to become manifest. The momentariness of the Realist conception requires that each element arise, endure for a moment, and then cease. This is not possible, says Nagarjuna's Madhyamika. "When the triad consisting of arising, [enduring, and ceasing] are discrete, they are not adequate to function as characteristics of the conditioned."[2] These three characteristics cannot be real, explains Nagarjuna in the following verses, for then each one would itself have to partake of arising, enduring, and ceasing. That is, if "arising" is a hypostatized process, then "arising" itself will have to arise, endure, and cease before the next hypostatized process, "enduring," can come to be manifest, and so forth. Nagarjuna will not accept this, for the result is infinite regress. On the other hand, these three processes must be characteristics of existent things. If not, it would be possible for a thing to arise but not endure or cease, for a thing to endure but not arise or cease, or for a thing to cease but not arise or endure.

There is another problem regarding the arising, enduring, or ceasing of existent things. What is it that arises, the existent thing? No, for an existent thing already exists, and cannot arise again. Does the non-exis-

[1] Prasannapada, 33

[2] karika VII.2

tent thing arise? No, for, if non-existent, it is not a "thing," and there is no possible nominal subject of the verbal predicate. "As such," Nagarjuna concludes, "neither the arising of an existent nor the arising of a non-existent is proper." Likewise the both existent and non-existent and the neither existent nor non-existent are improper.[1] In the same way, mutatis mutandis, Nagarjuna refuses to accept the enduring or the ceasing of existent or non-existent things. He has no choice but to conclude that dependent arising has no function, no reality. "With the non- establishment of arising, duration, and destruction, the conditioned does not exist. With the non-establishment of the conditioned, how could there be the unconditioned?" Dependent arising can have no relation either to existence or to non-existence. Arising, duration, and cessation are "an illusion, a dream." [2]

Following such a radical and comprehensive denial of dependent arising and its three characteristics, arising, enduring and ceasing, it would seem that Nagarjuna has completely annihilated the Buddha's central doctrine. However, there is one verse which demonstrates that this is not the proper explanation of Nagarjuna's agenda: "Whatever that comes to be dependently, that is inherently peaceful. Therefore, that which is presently arising as well as arising itself are peaceful."[3] The only way to reconcile this cataphatic statement with Nagarjuna's relentless denial of dependent arising presented above is to question the subject of the dilemma, namely conceptions of existence itself. What he is denying, then, are the very notions of existence or non- existence.[4] Reality must be devoid of conceptual dichotomies. Nagarjuna made this clear in demonstrating that fire and fuel or lust and the lustful one cannot be thought of as independently real, and now declares that even existence and non-existence are but illusory conceptions with no empirical basis. "A thing that is existent or non-existent is not produced." Further, if existence is unreal, then so is non-existence, for "existence and non-existence are, indeed, dependent upon one another."[5]

All that can be said to be real is the "inherently peaceful." This was, in fact, enunciated by Nagarjuna in the opening dedicatory verses, where dependent arising was linked with "the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious." This is in fact nothing less than nirvana itself, the "blown-out," the appeasement of defiling dispositions and graspings

---

[1]karika VII.20

[2]karika VII.33-34

[3]karika VII.16

[4]David Snellgrove, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 82-83

[5]karika I.7 and XXV.12, respectively

through the appeasement of passionate desires. The conceptual reality left when dispositions and conceptions are "blown out" corresponds exactly with the Buddha's original message: there is no soul in the individual and no self-hood of the universe but those conceived in ignorance. If one is to ask "Of whom is there old age and dying, and of what is there dependent arising," both the Buddha and Nagarjuna would answer that the question is wrongly formulated.[1] Nagarjuna's interpretation of dependent arising, then, holds that all that can be said to have any reality is the process, not the fluctuating elements comprising the process. Wrong views arise when one, through ignorance, believes there to be absolute objects, absolute temporality, absolute spatiality. "Those who posit the substantiality of the self as well as of discrete existents — these I do not consider to be experts in the meaning of the [Buddha's] message."[2]

A key to understanding Nagarjuna's distinction between reifying the elements versus seeing only the process is the two truths. From the standpoint of conventional truth, arising, enduring, and ceasing are seen. Where existents are observed, one has no choice but to say that they are dependently-arisen through these three characteristics. It is only from the standpoint of ultimate truth that dependent arising is peaceful. From this standpoint, when the notions of permanent being and identity are "blown out," all that is perceived is the flow of becoming. This flow is inherently without static objects such as elements or the individual self. This is fully compatible with and, indeed, explains the philosophical core of Buddhism: impermanency and soullessness.

[1]Warder, 119

[2]karika X.16

Chapter 8. Emptiness, the Ultimate Cosmology

8.1. Pre-Madhyamika Use of the Concept

The Buddha perceived that all things are transitory, that nothing endures. This was the logical basis for his declaration that nothing has an essence, that all is anatman. The Theravada tradition interpreted this to mean that no persons have a self beyond that constructed by the five fluctuating aggregates, but that the individual elements constituting existence did have an essence; this is what made the elements individual and irreducible. Mahayana offered a broader definition of soullessness and declared that, not only are persons devoid of a self, but that all of the elements comprising existence are also without essence. They are empty, sunya, of self-nature. [1] Further, the utter smallness of the particles and the sheer distances between them shows matter to be little more than empty space and existence ultimately nothing more than interactions of abstract energy fields. That the truest cosmological quality of things is emptiness, sunyata, came to be regarded as the central notion of Buddhism.[2]

The base formulation of emptiness comes from Nagarjuna, and it is the concept for which he is most famous, so much so that the Madhyamika school was often referred to as the Sunyata-vada, the "School of Emptiness." Notwithstanding, the concept was not original with him. The term "sunyata" appears a few places in the Pali Canon, but only a few. Here it tends to have the simple meaning of a lack of something. In the "Lesser Discourse on Emptiness," the Buddha says that, in a hall where there are monks gathered but in which there are no elephants or cows, one can say that the hall is "empty" of elephants and cows. Likewise, when a monk is meditating in a solitary forest, the forest is "empty" of

[1] An analogy from the history of Western physics (Western) will clarify these two conflicting notions of emptiness. Classical Newtonian physics saw everything as comprised of irreducible atoms with a determinable location and momentum. Belief in the determinism made possible by such a reified existence led French mathematician Pierre de Laplace to declare that, could he theoretically know the location and momentum of every monad in the universe, he could predict the exact future history of the entire cosmos. Quantum physics revolutionized this view by describing the qualities of the monadic elements of existence as being inherently unknowable.

[2] Kohn, 203

villages and villagers. “When something does not exist there, the latter [the place] is empty with regard to the former,” the Buddha defines.[1] This meaning of a lack is extended to also mean a lack of disturbances for the meditating mind. Emptiness is both an object for contemplation and a method of quietism; one can “practice emptiness” both by meditating on the emptiness of the self and by freeing oneself from disturbances.

The philosophical formulation of emptiness in the Theravada tradition is usually taken to be that expressed by the Abhidharma writings. The Realist school of the Abhidharma held that the elements of existence must not be empty, or else they would not be able to interact. It was just compounded objects, like the individual, that are empty, in that they have no enduring soul. The Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) school disagreed, pointing out that the elements, like the things they compound, must also be seen as empty. By applying emptiness to all things, this school used the concept much more systematically and frequently and expanded its meaning. The Abhidharma quest to define the true nature of things was replaced by a stress on non-dual, intuitive apprehensions of reality through wisdom, prajna. The highest achievement of wisdom, this school held, was the realization that all things, not just compound ones, are empty of an essence.

Taken far enough, the mystical Perfection of Wisdom insight into emptiness produced a paradox. Not only are things empty, the school declared, but emptiness is a thing rupa = sunyata). This meaning of this equation was not made entirely clear until Nagarjuna offered an interpretation of it. The equation is not to be taken too literally, but it seems just to express the notion that emptiness should not be seen merely as a negation. This was hinted at in the “Lesser Discourse on Emptiness,” where the Buddha said that, “through abiding in emptiness, [I] am now abiding in the fullness thereof.” Further, the text continued, it is comprehended that, when a place is empty of something like cows or a village, there is “something [which] remains there that does exist as a real existent.”[2] On the one hand, early Buddhism saw emptiness as a lack of being but, on the other, something remains which cannot be negated. These statements will not make sense in Buddhist terms unless reconciled with the Buddha’s absolute rejection of an ultimate ground of reality. The meaning of the paradox, according to the Perfection of Wisdom writings, is that emptiness is both and neither being and non-being, both and neither negation and affirmation. Emptiness is not really a thing any more than a thing is really empty, for reality cannot be pinned down in concepts.[1]

---

[1]Culasunnata-sutta, quoted in Nagao 1991, 52

[2]Culasunnata-sutta, quoted in Nagao 1991, 52 (italics mine)

This paradoxical, non-conceptual use of the notion of emptiness is reflected in the fact that certain of the Perfection of Wisdom writings used the notion without ever mentioning the term. The Diamond Sutra, for example, taught that the notion of emptiness was to be used like a hard diamond to "cut away all unnecessary conceptualization,"[2] including the idea of emptiness itself. The discourse accomplished this by presenting a series of paradoxes that demonstrated emptiness without using the word. For example, the Buddha is made to say:

"As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, . . . all these I must lead to nirvana, into that realm of nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to nirvana, no being at all has been led to nirvana."[3] (The similarity of such paradoxes with Zen teachings may be noted. The Vajracchedika is, indeed, the locus classicus of Zen. Cf. "Silent Meditation and Ch'an," in Kalupahana 1992, 228- 236)

A paradox like this will only make sense if the elements of it are not taken either as real or nonreal, but as, in terms of Perfect Wisdom, "empty."

The actual use of the term "emptiness" (sunyata) was likely avoided in the Diamond Sutra because, even though the paradoxes were half affirmative and half negatory, the potential for misunderstanding and seeing only the negative side of the equation was great. Equally dangerous was the possibility of clinging to the notion of emptiness as yet another, albeit apophatic, theory. These were dangers the Buddha was quite aware of. He said that, following his death, "the monks will no longer wish to hear and learn [my teachings], deep, deep in meaning, . . . dealing with the void (sunyata), but will only lend their ear to profane [teachings], made by poets, poetical, adorned with beautiful words and syllables."[4] What was crucial, the Buddha taught, was to use the teaching of emptiness as a provisional tool, a way to cut through illusion and achieve insight. His teachings were to be seen as a raft which gets one across a stream but which, upon reaching the other side, should be discarded. The Perfection of Wisdom school used the method of teaching with nonsensical paradoxes to show the final nature of things as empty and then to prevent one from grasping onto the concept of emptiness itself.

Nagarjuna adopted the Perfection of Wisdom teaching that the high-

---

[1]Harvey, 99

[2]Vajracchedika, quoted in Kohn, 57

[3]Vajracchedika 3, Edward Conze, trans., in Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, The Diamond Sutra (Poona, India: Ma Yoga Laxmi Rajneesh Foundation, 1979), 3.

[4]Samyutta- nikaya, quoted in Santina, 7

est form of intuitive wisdom is insight into the emptiness of all things. His innovation was to clarify this insight and apply it to all philosophical concepts in a more systematic way than had his predecessors. The result of this was that the notion of emptiness, though not new to Buddhist thought, suddenly became seen as a revolutionary concept. It is common for mystical expression to speak negatively of the Absolute, noumenal sphere; the mystical side of every religion in history has witnessed this apophaticism in some degree. Nagarjuna's innovation was to apply the via negativa to the phenomenal sphere, as well, and thereby to deny the essential reality of even relative dualities.

8.2. Emptiness as a Via Negativa, a Way of Negation

It may be helpful to precede a presentation of Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness with a discussion of his school's peculiar use of negation. As a philosophy of emptiness, the functions of refutation and negation are central to Madhyamika, and if the function of negation in the school is not understood, radical misinterpretations are likely. Even as reputable a scholar as Austin Waddell dismissed Madhyamika as "essentially a sophistic nihilism" which advocated the "extinction of Life."[1] The Madhyamika philosophy of emptiness is much more than just a method of negation or a declaration of negativity. However, since this is how both the West and Nagarjuna's fellow Orientals have often viewed it, that must be addressed first. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who pertinaciously misunderstood Nagarjuna as an absolutist,[2] Based on other, likely spurious, writings attributed to Nagarjuna, one could perhaps make such a claim. However, in the works which modern scholarship believes to be authentically Nagarjuna's, there is found no justification for Radhakrishnan's claim. expressed well the standard rationalist opinion of negation: "All negation depends on a hidden affirmation. Absolute negation is impossible. Total skepticism is a figment, since such skepticism implies the validity of the skeptic's judgment."[3] Classical Hindu thinkers, too, dismissed Nagarjuna's extreme use of the via negativa as self-condemned. The negation of everything is inconceivable without implying a positive ground thereby, they held, and so the ultimate truth cannot be negative; nothing can be proved false if nothing is taken as true.[1] The act of nega-

[1]L. Austin Waddell, Tibetan Buddhism (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 11

[2]"The whole show of Nagarjuna's logic is a screen for his heart, which believed in an absolute reality." (Radhakrishnan 1929, 656)

[3]ibid., 662

tion itself proves the existence of the negator, one could say.

Shin-ichi Hisamatsu has delineated five general uses of negation which are to be distinguished from Nagarjuna's. These are: 1) the negation of the existence of a particular, e.g. "there is no desk," or "there is no such thing as self-nature;" 2) a negative predicate, e.g. "pleasure is not pain," or "self-nature is not an existent;" 3) the abstract concept of "nothingness," as the opposite of being or of a general existent "somethingness;" 4) a blank of consciousness which would be equal to a state of dreamless sleep or, by conjecture, death, e.g. the Upanisadic analogy that "when one is in deep sleep, composed, serene, dreamless — that is the Self;"[2] a hypothetical negation whereby something which is usually considered to exist is denied, e.g. "self-nature is an illusion which does not really exist."[3] It was claimed above (see Introduction) that all religious philosophies save Madhyamika are, to some degree, Absolutisms which posit a really existing substratum in the cosmos. This substantialism is reflected both in the dismissal of the Madhyamika negative method by many Western scholars and classical Hindu thinkers, as well as in the above five uses of the concept of negation, for all directly assume the quality of essential existence or, by positing non-existence, indirectly assume the quality of existence. All non-Madhyamika uses of negation, in Murti's words, affirm a real thing "existing in some form or in some place other than what and where it was mistaken for." For example, to say "A is not B" is usually tantamount to saying "A is C."[4]

In contrast with such substantialist-oriented uses of negation is Nagarjuna's concept of emptiness, sunyata. Emptiness is the description of things as having no self- nature. Nagarjuna's emptiness was arrived at through a use of dialectics such as those exemplified in the above five, but its meaning was different. Emptiness is neither the denial of an existing thing or quality nor merely the negation of a concept. It is a call to shift one's perceptions to reconceive the nature of reality. The fifth option given above, negation as the cancellation of an illusion, is the closest to Nagarjuna's use, save one difference. The cancellation of an illusion is usually taken to mean that one is piercing phenomenal reality to perceive true ontological reality. An oft- repeated analogy is that of a person walking on a path at twilight who is startled to see a snake lying curled up in the middle of the path; on closer examination, the snake is seen to be

[1]Hiriyanna, 221

[2]Chandogya Upanisad, quoted in Ainslee T. Embree, ed., Sources of Indian Tradition, volume one (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 35 5)

[3]adapted from Shin-ichi Hisamatsu, "The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness," in Streng, 162

[4]Murti 1960, 154

nothing more than an abandoned piece of rope. The illusion that has been dispelled was never real. The snake never existed, and so the negation of it amounts to nothing more than a clearer perception of what always was. For Nagarjuna's Madhyamika, in contrast, the snake, or self-nature, is not such a simple illusion. Things do exist, even if only as dependently-arisen phenomena. That they have self- nature is not so much an illusion as it is the result of a misguided or improperly-trained faculty of conceptualization. One holds to a theory of self-nature not because of primal ignorance, like Advaita Vedanta's avidya, nor because of a clouded perception, like that of the rope, but because one cognizes falsely. "When the sphere of thought has ceased, that which is to be designated also has ceased," says Nagarjuna,[1] and when one ceases to adhere to a metaphysical theory like self-nature, it disappears. Emptiness is not so much the means to dispel an illusion as it is the correction of an error.

Nagarjuna's method of negation is by means of a logical use of the concept of emptiness. This is hinted at by the first appearance of the term in the karika which is in section four. Nagarjuna has just spent the first seven verses of this section discussing the relation of the five psychophysical aggregates to their causes, concluding that cause and effect are neither identical nor different and that there is no self- nature in any of the aggregates. He concludes the examination by saying that:

"when an analysis is made in terms of emptiness, whosoever were to address a refutation, all that is left unrefuted by him will be equal to what is yet to be proved.

"When an explanation in terms of emptiness is given, whosoever were to address a censure, all that is left uncensured by him will be equal to what is yet to be proved."[2]

(The crypticness of these verses is not the fault of the translation, for other translations are equally or more unclear.) What Nagarjuna seems to be saying here is that the concept of emptiness, when used as a method of negation, is exhaustive. When an analysis is made in terms of emptiness, all bases have been covered and no loopholes remain. Nagarjuna's negation of self-nature is thorough, and the burden of proof for further analysis lies with the opponent. When an explanation in terms of emptiness is given, there is no room for criticism by the opponent. The Madhyamika description of all things as empty is also exhaustive, and anyone offering a positive counter theory must provide an equally-exhaustive metaphysic.

---

[1]karika XVIII.7

[2]karika IV.8-9

This far-ranging value of the concept of emptiness is expressed succinctly in a later section. “Everything is pertinent for whom emptiness (sunyata) is proper,” Nagarjuna says. Conversely, “everything is not pertinent for whom the empty (sunyam) is not proper.”[1] This verse can be explained in terms of the two truths. Conventional truth deals with, not theories, but with the interaction of individual existents. These things, by virtue of having arisen dependently, are “the empty.” In conventional truth, emptiness is used as an adjective to describe the arisen existents, “the empty.” Only if these things are seen as “empty” can everything be “pertinent,” that is, can one formulate coherent and valid thoughts about reality.[2] Ultimate truth relates more to abstractions that go beyond everyday particulars. From this broader vantage point, the fact that all arisen things as well as the process of arising are empty is encompassed by the abstract theory of “emptiness.” This theory is comprehensive, encompassing any and all other concepts by virtue of showing how any description of reality must ultimately itself be negated and thus be empty. Only if one includes the notion of “emptiness” in one’s worldview can one’s theory be “pertinent.” As a method of negation, then, emptiness is, like the diamond, an incisive and effective tool. It does not merely refute false concepts, but it refutes them so comprehensively that the ball is in the opponent’s court, so to speak. “All that is left unrefuted by him will be equal to what is yet to be proved.”

Another aspect of using emptiness as a method of logical refutation is that, as a somewhat mystical concept based on intuitive wisdom (prajna), it does not merely negate. Emptiness also affirms. Substantialist methods of negation implicitly assert the opposite of what is negated, as in the above example where saying “A is not B” means “A is C.” Madhyamika negation, to continue this example, would say that “A is not B, nor is A not not B.” It is true that the Buddha leads innumerable beings to nirvana, but it is also true that no being at all has been led to nirvana. Such paradoxes are not meant to imply that ultimate reality transcends conceptual thinking, such that the relation of A to B cannot be conceived. Rather, since A and B are both empty of self-nature, and since both the beings led to nirvana and nirvana itself are empty of self- nature, equations are neither valid nor invalid. A cannot be B nor not B, for there is no essence of A which can either be identical with or different from the

---

[1]karika XXIV.14

[2]There may be confusion about this verse due to the fact that the primary translation of the Mulamadhyamakakarika prior to Kalupahana’s, i.e. Streng’s, contains an error here. The third and fourth padas of this verse are translated by Streng as “If emptiness does not ’work,’ then all existence does not ’work”’ (italics in original). The error is the term “emptiness” instead of “the empty” here. That the original word is “the empty” is proven by the fact that only “sunyam” fits the meter. The term ” sunyata” would make this line seventeen, not sixteen, beats long.

essence of B.

That the negatory aspect of emptiness is usually emphasized does not mean that emptiness is negative; rather, since Nagarjuna felt there to be more affirmative ontologies in need of refutation than annihilationist ones, he responded with negation more often than affirmation. However, both the Buddha and Nagarjuna make it quite clear that one should not stress negativity any more than one should affirm positivism. As Edward Conze puts it, "The Buddhist sage... should never really commit himself to either 'yes' or 'no' on anything." Since the Buddhist path is a middle one which renounces all extremes, if the sage "once says 'yes,' he must also say 'no.' And when he says 'no,' he must also say 'yes.'"[1] Emptiness is a middle view which, by denying essences and identities, stands between the extremes of being and non-being, between negation and affirmation. Since negation is no more real than affirmation, even the concept of emptiness must in the end be denied reality. After emptiness has shown the falsity of wrong views like self-nature, its job is done, and negation itself must be negated.[2]

8.3. Emptiness is Perceived, not Invented

Emptiness is not a theory which Nagarjuna invented, nor even one which he clarified — it is not a theory as such. Emptiness is just the description of the way things are, i.e. impermanent and without essences or self-natures. It is only the opposites of emptiness that are concepts. That is, metaphysical theories like self-nature, permanency, the soul, or God are concepts that require definition and defending by those who hold them. Emptiness requires no defending. When obscurities are cleared away, one sees, through intuitive wisdom, the nature of things as they always have been. This nature, before the addition of defiling concepts, is, the Buddha described, like the clean water of a clear pool, "self-luminous through and through."[3] The Diamond Sutraexpressed this by having the Buddha say that nothing has ever been taught by him. "If a man should say that the Law [Dharma] has been taught by the Tathatagata, he would say what is not true."[4] Nagarjuna echoed this in saying that "the Buddha did not teach... some thing to some one at some place."[1] What the Bud-

[1]Conze 1975, 132

[2]As if to answer this very question and tie it in with theory of two truths, Neils Bohr said "There are trivial truths and there are great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true." (quoted in Malaclypse the Younger, p. 9)

[3](source not noted) quoted in Conze 1975, 162

[4]Vajracchedika, quoted in Zimmer, 522

dha and Nagarjuna did was to show that concepts are false and distort the true nature of reality. They did not offer thoughts of their own to replace false ones, but taught that all ideas, including even the philosophy of Buddhism, must be appeased, or not grasped on to. When notions like self-nature, the soul, or permanency are "blown out" (nirvana), the true nature of reality, emptiness, is seen.

The Visuddhimagga, the most important post-canonical work of the Older School,[2] delineated seven stages of purification and the development of insight. Each stage is one of greater perception of the soullessness of reality culminating in, in the seventh and final stage, perception of the "signless," the "wishless," and "emptiness,"[3] which are three qualitative descriptions of the unconditioned nature of reality. This insight is the Perfect Wisdom of pre-Madhyamika Buddhism, which insight Nagarjuna found to be the supreme expression of Buddhist knowledge. The heart of this Perfect Wisdom is nothing more than a perception of emptiness. Both the Perfection of Wisdom school and Nagarjuna agree that a proper understanding of the Buddha's philosophy as reported by the original discourses inevitably leads to seeing all things as empty. This was in contrast to the Abhidharma attitude that a study of the scriptures can allow one to formulate a neat set of concepts to define and describe the nature of reality. It must be admitted, though, that Nagarjuna's idea that emptiness is seen, not invented, is only implicit in the karika, for he never expressly describes the nature or the importance of this insight. What he does make clear is that emptiness is empirically evident. That emptiness is perceptible is only a manner of speaking, for it is explained that emptiness is not a "thing" which can be defined and perceived. Rather, it is a lack, as, for example, one can speak of the concept of darkness even though it is nothing more than a lack of light. The term Nagarjuna uses most frequently is pasyati, "perceives."[4] What is perceived is the non-existence of self-nature in things, and an awareness of this non-existence is referred to as the perception of emptiness.

One may ask, if the original nature of all things is unconditioned emptiness, then why was it ever hidden in the first place? On one level, this question can be answered by pointing to the first link of the chain of dependent arising, ignorance. On the basis of ignorance, concepts and consciousness arise. Concepts by their very nature and function create artificial divisions in the otherwise undivided, seamless reality, and thus

[1] karika XV.24

[2] Kohn, 245

[3] Harvey, 256

[4] Kalupahana 1986, 82

obscure its true nature. Existence and essence, though seemingly ultimate concepts, are nonetheless themselves artificial divisions which thus distort the "self-luminous pool of clear water." The Madhyamika stress on emptiness is one way to demonstrate the unreality and falseness of concepts.[1] On another level, the question cannot be answered. If one further inquires, "and what created ignorance?" the Buddhist can only point out that, in the twelve-link circular chain of dependent arising, ignorance is causally conditioned by previous karma and death. More cogent, though, one should not even ask such a question; since ignorance is a "lack" and not a "thing," it is not proper to ask how it was created. Beyond these replies, further speculation is not fruitful.

Some schools of Buddhism, especially Zen, would offer the above explanation and then stop. The mind cannot possess anything, a modern Zen teacher says, and if one continues questioning, the teacher has nothing to say but "in Japan in the spring we eat cucumbers."[2] Nagarjuna's philosophy supports the same conclusions, but arrives at them by a quite different way. One way to counteract the conceptualizing tendency is by offering alternative concepts. Notions of self-nature and the soul are root causes of suffering. As a means of "fighting fire with fire," Nagarjuna offers a systematic philosophy of emptiness as a conceptual antidote to these notions.

8.4. Dependent Arising + No Self-Nature = Emptiness

The Perfection of Wisdom school taught that emptiness is a fact of reality that is indirectly perceived by virtue of non-empty things not being perceived. Nagarjuna's innovation was to expand the meaning of emptiness by applying the notion to the conceptual sphere as well as the experiential one. That is, whereas earlier Buddhism saw all composite things as empty of soul, Nagarjuna declared them to be empty of existence, as well.

The crux of the Madhyamika philosophy of emptiness is a reinterpretation of dependent arising by a distinction between conventional and ultimate truths. The Theravada definition of dependent arising was the interdependency of irreducible atoms which, through mutual contingency, create a world of phenomenal things. Things are empty of self-nature in that they are not self- subsisting, but were brought into being only through the action of dependent arising. Nagarjuna said that, from the point of view of conventional truth, this theory is applicable. Perfect

[1]Williams, 62

[2]Shunryu Suzuki, 138

wisdom, though, allows one the insight that even the causal process itself is empty, for there is no self-nature to be found anywhere, in any thing. A greater understanding of dependent arising shows things to be more than just causally interdependent; they are interdependent for their very definition and essential self-nature, too. "In the absence of self-nature, there is no other-nature," Nagarjuna declares numerous times,[1] the meaning of which is that, without dependency, things cannot even have an individual identity and essence.[2] There are thus no things, but only the process by which things came to be, and this process, too, is empty. The main reason for declaring things to be without essence is empirical, as explained above. Self-nature simply is not observed. More than this, though, logic leads to the same conclusion. If the identity of dependent arising with emptiness were just an expression of mystic intuition, the function of Madhyamika as a philosophy would be precluded. The logical argument that leads to the theory of emptiness is this: The nature of reality is dependently arisen; that is attested to by the Buddha, by observation, and by logic. "A thing that is not dependently arisen is not evident," Nagarjuna declares.[3] If things are dependently arisen, then they are phenomenal, not real, entities. Self-nature must, by definition, be a really-existent and permanent essence. A permanent essence never changes nor acts, so self-nature will never interact, hence things that interact or are the product of interaction have no essence. "A non-empty effect will not arise; a non-empty effect will not cease."[4] Dependently arisen things have no self-nature. Both their arising and their very essential definition are the result of causal interdependence. They are thus empty of existence, of self-nature, and of any other type of hypothetical essence. "A thing that is non-empty is indeed not evident," he concludes,[5] but he does not stop there. If things are empty of essence, then the whole process of dependent arising is also called into question. If things are empty, then what even is the point of saying that they arise and cease? "If something is empty, it follows that it is non-ceased and non- arisen."[6] There is no "it" which can partake of arising or ceasing. Both arisen things and the process of dependent arising itself are but "an illusion, a dream, a [mythical city]."[7]

---

[1]karika I.3, XV.3, XXII.2, XXII.4, XXII.9

[2]This idea that things are relative for, not just their arising, but their very identity has led some interpreters of Madhyamika to translate sunyata as, not "emptiness," but "relativity" or "non-exclusiveness." (Cf. Stcherbatsky, 242, and Ramana, 42, respectively)

[3]karika XXIV.19

[4]karika XX.17

[5]karika XXIV.19

[6]karika XX.18

[7]karika VII.34

This relentless negation is the revolutionary aspect of Nagarjuna's Madhyamika. He is not content just to refute the self-nature of composite things, nor even of the individual elements comprising things, but goes so far as to refute the reality of the entire process of interaction itself. With the negation of any kind of self-nature, anywhere, all sense of real and unreal, of cause and effect, of identity and difference is lost. The only way left to speak of things is in terms of emptiness. The bold consistency with which this via negativa "has been carried through every phase of thought and feeling, to the very limit," says Heinrich Zimmer, "keeps a wonderful, really sublime wind of detachment blowing through" the entire philosophy.[1]

However, this negative method must not overshadow positive affirmation, or the Madhyamika would surrender to its opponent's accusations that the philosophy of emptiness is mere nihilism[2] Instead of saying simply that dependent arising is empty or that only empty things dependently arise, Madhyamika declares that the formula dependent arising = emptiness is an affirmative equation. The Perfection of Wisdom formula that matter is emptiness and emptiness is matter rupa = sunyata) had a similar purpose, but its meaning was slightly different. There, the equation was made to demonstrate the paradoxical non-dual nature of intuitive wisdom. For Nagarjuna, the formula dependent arising = emptiness was meant to be taken literally. One must not lean to either side of the equation; over-emphasizing dependent arising or being would lead to a sort of positivism, and too much stress on emptiness or non-being could engender nihilism This equation must be carefully explained. If the declaration that dependent arising is identical with emptiness or that being is identical with non-being is not properly understood, then it would seem to be, in Nagao's words, "the raving of a madman."[3]

If things were not empty, then they could in no way arise, dependently or otherwise. Conversely, if things arise, they could in no way have a self- nature. Both being and non-being are real in one sense; there is being, for things do arise, even if but phenomenally. That the chain of arising has, not one, or two, but twelve links of existential causality demonstrates the at-least-partial reality of being. However, as these things are not absolutely real but have not always existed and will one day cease to exist,

---

[1]Zimmer, 521

[2] Much of the misunderstanding of Nagarjuna's philosophy as nihilism especially by Westerners, could have been avoided if the etymology of sunya had been kept in mind. The word likely comes from a root which means "to swell," the interpretation of which is probably that something which appears swollen is hollow, empty, on the inside. Sunyata would then be not a mere nothingness, but a certain potentiality, an internal openness within apparently full entities. Cf. Conze 1975, 130f.

[3]Nagao 1989, 9

they are non-being. This idea of non-being is not a nothingness, for it does not deny that things do, in some way, exist. Rather, non-being is the denial of an essential self-nature in things. From another angle, being and non-being are unreal concepts which can only exist dependently. They are thus empty, devoid of any independent definition.[1] This equal status of each half of the dependent arising / emptiness equation is reflected in the status of the two truths. Ultimate truth is no more real than conventional truth, but is just a different way of looking at the same thing. They are each truth, even though their verdicts conflict, and neither level of truth could exist alone. Without relying upon conventional truth, ultimate truth is not taught, Nagarjuna said,[2] and without the existence of a higher truth, there could be no such thing as Perfect Wisdom and knowledge of emptiness. Conventional truth is that things arise, endure, and cease, and are thus real. Ultimate truth is that, as transitory phenomena, things are empty of self-nature, and are thus unreal. Each one of these statements is true, and neither should be asserted to the exclusion of the other, else either positivism or nihilism would result.

A final reason that the formula dependent arising = emptiness must be clearly understood is that it may seem, prima facie, to evidence a contradiction in Madhyamika philosophy. The relation between things has been demonstrated to be neither one of identity nor one of difference. A is not B, nor is A not not B. Yet, Nagarjuna here appears to be declaring an identity relation. The resolution of this discrepancy is that the equation is not one of simple identity. Neither dependent arising nor emptiness has a nature which can relate to something else; neither has any form of real existence. Thus, their relation, as well as their own nature, is empty and indefinable. They are equal only in the fact that neither has self- nature. The formula is a practical guide, not a dictum of logic.

Though dependent arising and emptiness, cataphaticism and apophaticism, are said to be equally valid and important, Nagarjuna understood that there is still a tendency for spiritually insecure, unenlightened individuals to reify emptiness and become distressed thereby. In a further attempt to prevent this, he offered yet another reason why dependent arising must be seen as empty. An opponent, misunderstanding the meaning and use of emptiness, may object that the concept undercuts the entire Buddhist philosophy and path. If all is empty, the opponent objects, there exists no dependent arising, and the four Noble Truths, the teaching

---

[1]Thus is the foundation and explanation of the wonderful outlook of Zen, which manages to teach the utter purposelessness and futility of all things and yet at the same time to find in that meaninglessness of life the very motivation for joy, humor, love, and compassion. Cf., for example, Alan Watts, “The Secret of Zen,” in The Spirit of Zen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), 46-64

[2]karika XXIV.10

of the Buddha, the community of monks, and the Buddha himself are invalidated. "Speaking in this manner about emptiness, you contradict the three jewels [Buddha, his Law, and his community], as well as the reality of the fruits, both good and bad, and all worldy conventions," charges the opponent.[1] On the contrary, responds Nagarjuna, it is the opponent's theory of self- nature that contradicts all of these things. It is the philosophy of emptiness that makes possible causality, the Buddha's teaching and the Buddhist path, all change and growth, and nirvana itself. It is only the fact that things do not have an immutable essence and identity that makes them able to change, interact, and condition new events. Further, it is only the fact that the defilements and suffering are empty of self-nature that makes them susceptible to eradication. If there were self- nature in things, then defilements would be eternal and suffering inescapable. Emptiness is thus not only the description of dependently arisen things nor only the nature of the process of dependent arising itself. Rather, emptiness is the very thing which makes dependent arising and hence the entire phenomenal world possible. Thus, whatever one's attitude towards the world, emptiness is a positive theory. If one dislikes the world, it is emptiness which makes it possible to change the world or escape from it. If one likes the world, it is emptiness which allowed it to come into being. Later Mahayana philosophy used emptiness as a springboard for its very positive doctrines of Love and Compassion, declaring that, only after the world is negated and selflessness is seen, can one truly empathize with the plight of one's fellow humans and desire earnestly to help them.[2]

8.5. Emptiness is a Theory of No-Theory

One of the more disturbing results of the doctrine of emptiness is that it would seem to deny the possibility of enlightenment. It is relatively easy to accept the position that all existent, mundane, and hence unpleasant things are empty, for one can still hope for a pleasant enlightenment or, in certain types of Buddhism, afterlife. If, as Nagarjuna claims, all things, both worldly as well as transcendent, are empty, then how can one retain hope and aspire to the ultimate goal of freedom, nirvana? In response to one who expresses such concerns, Nagarjuna says that "you do not comprehend the purpose of emptiness. As such, you are tormented by emptiness and the meaning of emptiness."[3]

There are two significances implied by this statement of Nagar-

---

[1]karika XXIV.6

[2]Nagao 1991, 49. Cf. also 33-34

[3]karika XXIV.7

juna. One, there is a meaning of emptiness besides the obvious one of lack of self- nature. Two, the concept has a pragmaticvalue as well as a logical one. The former, the fact that emptiness has a greater meaning, was already discussed. This meaning is that, besides referring merely to the lack of essential reality in things, emptiness also betokens the potential of things to interact and change, to arise and cease. Reality is not “nothingness,” but an indefinable mix of being and nonbeing and both and neither.[1] The latter, the pragmatic value of emptiness, is that it prescribes a method by which unpleasantries can be appeased. Suffering is caused by dispositions, desires, expectations, and graspings, all of which in turn are caused by an improper understanding of the world and the way things are. If one comprehends emptiness, one ceases to cling to desires, for the things one would desire are shown to be empty and thus not desirable; one would cease to grasp and cling, for the pleasant things which one would want to hold on to are seen as unreal; one would cease to form false theories and concepts about reality, for the theory of emptiness precludes the tendency to theorize; one would not entertain false hopes for a concrete afterlife and a real Savior-figure, for the Buddha and his teachings are both seen as provisional; and, finally, one would have an incentive to appease suffering, for, being empty, suffering is susceptible to change and, hence, can be vanquished.

The pragmatic function of emptiness is intimately tied to its non-theoretical nature. Part of the nature of nirvana is the appeasement of the tendency to theorize excessively and grasp onto theories. It is thus crucial to make as clear as possible, before examining nirvana, the anti-theoretical character of emptiness. From the standpoint of conventional truth, emptiness is the declaration that dependently arisen things have no independent identity. They are “the empty.” From the standpoint of ultimate truth, emptiness is the description of all things, events, processes, and life-forms as having no real existence. All is “emptiness.” Both “the empty” and “emptiness” are descriptions, not attributes. A thing or event does not partake of emptiness, but rather, since it assuredly does not partake of self-nature, it is described as empty. "’Empty,’ ’non-empty,’ ’both,’ or ’neither’ — these should not be declared,” Nagarjuna explains. They “are expressed only for the purpose of communication.”[2] The true reality, the “suchness” (tathata) of the cosmos, must be seamless. Conceptualizing it imposes artificial divisions and distinctions on that which is undivided. Notions like existence or nonexistence, self-nature or other- nature,

[1]The reader’s patience is requested in this improper and perhaps misleading continual use of the term “reality.” No alternatives were found.

[2]karika XXII.11

emptiness or fullness, are wholly improper. There are times, however, when one would wish to refer to this "suchness." No manner of speaking or means of cognizing is proper, but, in light of the inveterate tendency of humans to seek and grasp onto supposed positive notions like "soul" and "existence," the most proper designation is a negative one.

Nagarjuna therefore uses such a notion as a means of communication only. This is referred to, in the Buddhist tradition, as "skillful means" (upaya), the ability of a teacher to tailor his or her speech and philosophical system to the ears and understanding of his or her audience.[1] The teacher communicates thoughts and formulates theories only insofar as they would be helpful to the student. This was Nagarjuna's intent in expounding the idea of emptiness; it is a useful way of speaking, for it is less misleading than ideas like "God" or "permanency," but it still has no ultimate applicability.

Nagarjuna's use of emptiness as a "skillful means" has a specific function and purpose. One of the chief causes of bondage is, not so much the faculty of conceptualization, but rather the propensity to grasp onto the products of that faculty. The rational nature, like the dispositions Nagarjuna discussed in section seven of the karika, has a value. Concepts are an important and necessary tool to be used in ordering one's world and acting within it. The problem is that rational creatures, be they humans or Gods, tend to ascribe excessive validity to these concepts. This is done for two reasons. One is ignorance: the rational creature does not know or ignores the fact that his or her mental nature is only a tool and has limited applicability. The other, and perhaps foundational, reason that sentient creatures cling to the mental processes is desire. Desiring pleasure, the mind reifies the apparently pleasurable things in the hope of thereby possessing them and preventing them from ceasing. Fearing death, the individual reifies the apparent existence of life itself and thereby acts with excessive and unjustified selfishness.[2] The Buddha taught that these two tendencies, desire and the faith in the results of mentation, are, indirectly, the cause of bondage. "Desire, know I thy root," he is reported to have said. "From conception thou springest; No more shall I indulge in conception; I will have no desire any more."[3]

There are, as explained, two significances of the notion of emptiness. One is simply that, when one is enlightened, one sees things as

[1]Williams, 143

[2]The Buddha did uphold the importance of self-preservation, not because the self is real, but only out of compassion — compassion for oneself as well as compassion for others. Self-preservation must be tempered by "other-preservation."

[3]quoted in Candrakirti's Prasannapada, quoted in Murti 1960, 223 (samkalpa translated as "conception." Cf. Monier-Williams, 1126)

empty. It is not a concept, but an observation. The other significance is the pragmaticone. As a "skillful means," emptiness is an antidote to an excessive emphasis on mentation. Having demonstrated that all things are empty, Nagarjuna explains that it is pointless to hypostatize anything. "When all things are empty, why [speculate on] the finite, the infinite, both…, and neither…? Why [speculate on] the identical, the different, the eternal, the non-eternal, both, or neither?"[1] Emptiness, as a concept, acts as an antidote to this misuse of the rational faculty in two ways. One, if all things are empty, then no speculation is worthwhile. Excessive belief in concepts is misguided and, ultimately, debilitating, for it distracts one from the proper path, which is tranquillity and appeasement of desires. The other use of the concept of emptiness is a positive one. The neophyte who has not developed the Perfect Wisdom which allows him or her to see all things as empty may need to use concepts as a temporary guide. The mind, by its very nature, needs to think. The trained mind can dwell in peaceful wisdom (prajna), but the untrained one needs a system to direct its thoughts properly. The theory of emptiness can act as an object for contemplation, an abstraction on which meditation can be focused. Once the mind in training achieves perfect wisdom, then even the notion of emptiness itself must be abandoned. In this context, the notion has pragmatic value only; it is like, in Streng's words, "a phantom destroying another phantom."[2] Once the phantom of real existence has been appeased, then the phantom of empty existence must also be released.

That Nagarjuna's philosophy is a middle path must be kept in mind to understand properly the function of emptiness as a concept. Madhyamika is, obviously, not a philosophy that declares there to be a real structure in the universe which can be defined in rational formulas, so emptiness is clearly not a positive theory. Neither is Madhyamika a nihilism, so Nagarjuna is not advocating the destruction of concepts or the stifling of ratiocination. The middle path rather advocates the appeasement of conceptualization. Thoughts have a certain function — they are useful and necessary in relation to the mundane world — but they must not be applied to ultimate truth; they must be appeased. The point of the idea of emptiness, Nagarjuna says, is "the relinquishing of all views."[3] This pragmatic function of emptiness for Nagarjuna is indicated by the fact that he did not devote a section of his karika to it; if emptiness were a description of Ultimate Reality, or if it were an absolute concept, then he certainly would have explained it more fully. What he does devote a

[1] karika XXV.22-23

[2] Streng, 92

[3] karika XIII.8

section to (section XXIV, "On Truth") is an explanation that emptiness is, not a nihilism or an Ultimate Reality, but only the principle of relativity and the best description of conditioned things.[1]

Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness, no matter how clear and precise, still could never prevent all misunderstanding. C. W. Huntington points out the dangers of misconceiving it with the following example: Buddhist teachers often remind their students that while mistaken beliefs concerning the mundane are relatively easy to correct, like dousing a fire with water, if one reifies the notion of emptiness, then it is as if the water intended to extinguish the blaze has itself caught fire.[2] To reify the concept of emptiness is a blatant error, for it is an idea whose function is to prevent reification of concepts. "Those who are possessed of the view of emptiness [as a theory] are said to be incorrigible," Nagarjuna wrote.[3] To hypostatize emptiness would be both ridiculous and an insult to the Buddha's doctrine. It would be ridiculous because emptiness is not a thought but the absence of thoughts, not a theory but a criticism of theorizing. Candrakirti demonstrates the absurdity of reifying emptiness by saying that it would be like one person saying to another "I have no wares to sell you," and the other person responding "give me what you call those 'no wares.'"[4] Since emptiness is not a thing, it cannot be thought of in positive terms. It is nothing more than a lack of theories, not a theory itself.[5] , Nagarjuna writes: "If I were to advance any proposition whatsoever, from that I would incur error. On the contrary, I advance no proposition. Therefore, I incur no error." (pratijna translated as "proposition." Cf. Monier-Williams 664)

8.6. Emptiness is Freedom Itself

The relationship between the anti-theoretical function of emptiness and freedom, nirvana, is quite close. Thoughts are useful, but the results of these thoughts, namely concepts, are not ultimately real. Similarly, desires and dispositions have a specific function, for they assist the individual in acting in and interacting with his or her world, but if too much emphasis is placed on any of these, i.e. thoughts, desires, or dispositions, then one will hold a false view of the world. This will lead to desiring

[1]Sprung, in translating the Prasannapada, wrote that the term sunyata should be read as "the absence of both being and non-being in things." Sprung, 13 (italics mine)

[2]Huntington, 22

[3]karika XIII.8

[4]Prasannapada, in Sprung, 150

[5]In the Vigrahavyavartani, verse 29

and grasping onto things which do not exist, which, finally, will bind one to the phenomenal cycle of birth-and-death. Enlightenment is achieved when the true nature of things as transitory and as having no real self-nature is seen, understood, and accepted. Nirvana is nothing more than the "blowing out" of false thoughts and their concomitant desires.

This may seem to be a surprisingly simplistic account of the way to achieve enlightenment. Nagarjuna would say that, yes, it may seem simplistic. And it is. There is no transcendent realm that must be discovered, no ultimate knowledge that must be obtained, no psychic or spiritual powers that must be won. To become free, one need do no more than release, or appease, the things onto which one is grasping and see reality as it truly is, as it always has been. Nagarjuna discussed four stages in explaining the cause of bondage and the way to release:

1) "Those who are of little intelligence, who perceive the existence as well as the non-existence of [things], do not perceive the appeasement of the object, the auspicious."[1] Nagarjuna has here referred to appeasing "things" because this quote is the conclusion to section five, the examination of the material elements. The formula is identical, though, with the appeasement of dispositions and thoughts, of things as well as sentient creatures. As long as one obstinately clings to thoughts of existence and non- existence, one will never see the way things truly are, which does not fall into either category. Until one sees things and individuals as empty, one can never release the binding forces.

2) "From the appeasement of the modes of self and self-hood, one abstains from creating the notions of 'mine' and 'I'."'[2] One of the words for ego is ahamkara, which means, literally, "I-making." (The word "ego" in Greek means nothing more than "I.") Self-hood is not a really-existing thing, for the nature of reality does not allow for permanency and individuality. An individual is "individual:" it is the monad which cannot be further reduced into constituent elements. Such a monad must, by definition, have self- nature, or it would be neither definable in independence nor be enduring. Since such a monad could not exist, there can be no such thing as an in-dividual.

3) "When views pertaining to 'mine' and 'I' …have waned, then grasping comes to cease. With the waning of [grasping], there is waning of birth."[3] It is the false belief in a real ego that underlies and creates all problems. The self does exist in a conventional way, for the five aggregates have come together to form a temporary composite. However,

---

[1]karika V.8

[2]karika XVIII.2

[3]karika XVIII.4

to believe that this self is ultimately real or will endure will cause one to grasp onto pleasant things and avoid unpleasant ones, both of which will bind one to the cycle of repeated deaths. To escape rebirth, one need only appease the views pertaining to "mine" and "I."

4) "On the waning of defilements of action, there is release. Defilements of action belong to one who discriminates, and these in turn result from obsession. Obsession, in its turn, ceases within the context of emptiness."[1] When one ceases to desire for and grasp onto things and concepts, nirvana follows. Why the five aggregates came together to produce the illusion of self-hood in the first place is not entirely clear, and a comprehensive answer to that question can never be known. What is clear is that, having come together, the notion of self-hood arises. This self is real, in a limited way. Without the benefit of wisdom, however, this self-hood reflects on its existence and believes itself to be real and permanent, and it begins to seek pleasure and avoid pain. One of the primary ways it continues to fool itself is through the use of concepts. It reifies notions like mine, existence, and possession. The teaching of emptiness allows it to see the impossibility of real possession, the lack of an essential nature within itself, and the empty relativity of all dependently arisen things. The notion of emptiness allows it to extinguish its false notions. The self is not completely extinguished, for the limited existence that it does have is true. What is extinguished is defiling passion, any expectation of permanency, and excessive "selfishness."

To summarize, the four stages are as follows: 1) ignorance causes one to reify things and the self; 2) appeasing the thought of self-hood puts an end to the process of "I-making;" 3) when the ego is appeased, grasping is released, and rebirth ends; 4) with the waning of grasping and dispositions and the cessation of transmigration, freedom is won. These four steps delineate both how belief in the self comes to be, i.e. through ignorant perceptions of existence and non-existence, and how freedom can be realized, i.e. through a proper perception of emptiness. It would be a mistake to see this process as a linear one. In the form Nagarjuna presents it, ignorance causes bondage and wisdom releases one from it. This is only one way to understand the process, for wisdom does not necessarily follow the release of dispositions; looked at from the other direction, it is wisdom which allows one to release the dispositions in the first place. The whole process must be seen as one whose elements dependently arise.

Perfect wisdom, the insight of emptiness, provides one with a certain sort of power — not power to make, but power to refrain from mak-

[1]karika XVIII.5

ing.[1] It is ignorance that causes one to construct dispositions and passionate desires, and so, indirectly, it is ignorance which has the power of bringing the entire phenomenal world into manifest existence. Wisdom provides one with the power to appease this process and release the world. Lest this sound like an inversion of good and evil, it must be pointed out that the power of ignorance is not a real power, for the world it brings into existence is but a phantom. Similarly, the function of wisdom as extinguishing the world is not a negative one, for wisdom merely causes the phenomenal world to revert to its truest state.

The function of the conceptualizing faculty has a broader impact than merely creating false views about self-hood. The faculty of thought is that which applies distinctions to the perceived cosmos, which differentiates between subject and object, noun and verb, past and future, motion and rest, and any such dualities. Nagarjuna says that "when the sphere of thought has ceased, that which is to be designated also has ceased."[2] It is thus the sphere of thought which, in a way similar to the Idealism of Berkeley or Bradley, creates the observed world and, in a way similar to the Sapir-Whorf linguistic hypothesis, defines the elements of that world. Nagarjuna says that the truest description of reality, i.e. the world as it is without the hypostatized notions of the ignorant mind, is "independently realized, peaceful, unobsessed by obsessions, without discriminations and a variety of meanings."[3] The character of reality is not differentiated; all divisions are artificial and imposed by the mind. Without the passionate clinging of the unenlightened mind, the best possible description of this reality is that it is at peace and restful. There is process and flux, for elements continue to arise and cease dependently. Without the imposition of the insecure mind, though, this process is undisturbed by obsessions. Moreover, were the insecure mind not to attribute essences to the process and its products, there would not even be a need to refer to them as "empty."

When one's dispositions and obsessions are extinguished, one sees this nature of reality as it is, i.e. empty, undifferentiated, and undisturbed. Since self-hood is no longer reified, the tranquillity of the world becomes the tranquillity of the individual, and nirvana can be described in very positive terms indeed. An early scripture says that the individual who has appeased ideas, false views, and passions "enters the glorious city of Nirvana, stainless and undefiled, secure and calm and happy, and his mind is emancipated as a perfected being."[1] Nirvana is not happy etc. by its na-

[1]Streng, 159

[2]karika XVIII.7

[3]karika XVIII.9

ture; since it is not a thing, no adjectives can be applied to it. Rather, since the status of the unenlightened person is suffering, the release of suffering is, subjectively, pleasant. Similarly, nirvana is not calm by its nature; since the flux of elements is a non-real and empty one, it can be described as peaceful. Though nirvana is said to be empty, this apparently negative term is actually the foundation for the most positive of descriptions.

No matter how much one may stress that nirvana is not a thing but is a lack of thing- ness, there is much likelihood that unenlightened people would think of it as a concrete goal or a tangible heaven. Seeing nirvana in this way would be yet another false concept and form of grasping, and would erect yet another obstacle to freedom. To preclude this possibility, Nagarjuna enunciated what could perhaps be the most controversial verse in the karika: "The life-process (samsara) has no thing that distinguishes it from freedom (nirvana). Freedom has no thing that distinguishes it from the life- process."[2] The term used to refer to the life- process, samsara, can be translated as "wandering" or "transmigration." It is a term for the cycle of birth-and-death in its imprisoning, pre-enlightenment aspect. To say that the world of suffering is identical with the highest and most honored of goals of Buddhism would seem to be flagrant blasphemy.

There are two main significances of Nagarjuna's equating the life-process with freedom, one theoretical and one practical. First, it is only blasphemy from the standpoint of essentialism. If there is a self- nature in either, then the two would assuredly be different. Bondage, as a real thing, would have to be broken free from, and enlightenment, as a true state, would have to be achieved. However, the refutation of self-nature applies to these notions as well; both are empty. Nirvana and the phenomenal world do not exist, as such. They only are separate due to their being differentiated and named by the hypostatizing mind.[3] The tendency to see them as concrete things actually would deny a person the possibility of ever releasing one and obtaining the other. If the life-process had a self- nature, and if one were bound within that life-process, then one could never leave. Similarly, if nirvana were a real attribute of which the unenlightened individual were not yet partaking, and if it had an essence, then it could never be achieved. It is only because both nirvana and the life-process are empty that they can be said to be identical. Again, Nagarjuna's attitude towards identity and difference must be kept in mind to prevent a misunderstanding of this equation. In saying that they are

[1]Milindapanha, quoted in Embree, 114

[2]karika XXV.19

[3]Streng, 45

identical, he is not saying that they have an identity-relation, for neither has an essence which can relate. Rather, as empty, they can each be said to lack self-nature, and are identical in that neither is real. This relation is made clear in the discussion of the nature of the Buddha in section twenty-two. "Whatever is the self-nature of the Tathagata, that is also the self- nature of the universe," Nagarjuna says. The two are equal because and only because "the Tathagata is devoid of self-nature. This universe is also devoid of self-nature."[1]

The pragmatic value of equating nirvana and the cycle of birth-and-death is that it demonstrates the attainability of enlightenment. Freedom and bondage are not identifiable things with separate and distinct spheres of influence. To borrow a simplistic view of theism, if the world comprised one plane and freedom another, transcendent one, then the feasibility of escaping one and attaining the other would be highly suspect. Nagarjuna's declaration that freedom is the world and the world is freedom demonstrates that enlightenment is readily at hand. One need do no more than shift one's perceptions to find it. The unpleasant world is one constructed through ignorance and grasping dispositions. The pleasant (or not-unpleasant) world is found simply by understanding the meaning of emptiness and ceasing to reify the phenomenal one. Seen from the conventional or unenlightened vantage point, the cosmos is a cycle of birth-and-death characterized by suffering. Seen from the vantage point of wisdom or of ultimate truth, the cosmos is an ever-flowing, ever-changing empty process.[2]

The notion of emptiness may, at first, seem negative and limiting. It seems to deny the cosmos the option of having existence, of being real. When comprehended properly, though, the paradox of emptiness is seen as the most liberating of all possible teachings. In teaching that the self is empty and that the universe is empty, it demonstrates that both are one and the same, and that their distinction was based on nothing more than obscured understanding. The limitations caused by the notion of self-hood are destroyed. The true nature of the enlightened one is seen to be the true nature of the universe, for both are empty. In enlightenment, one becomes the universe.

---

[1]karika XXII.16

[2]Cf. Nagao 1991, 177-179

Chapter 9. Conclusion

As with any subject, much more could be said about Madhyamika, and often has been. Candrakirti's commentary, for example, runs to many hundreds of pages. This thesis, too, far exceeds the normal length of bachelor's theses. In light of Nagarjuna's teaching that excessive theorizing is one of the main causes of suffering and bondage, it may seem that lengthy commentary is self- negating. This objection would be quite valid, were the intent of these research projects to express truth and the nature of reality. However, as exemplified in the Introduction, were that the intent of these works, they likely would have said no more than "this flax weighs three pounds."

The purpose of the philosophy of Madhyamika, with its stress on emptiness, is not to discard all theorizing. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that theories are not ultimately valid. Ascribing excessive validity to the products of thought will cause one to grasp onto them and lose sight of the true nature of things, which is empty. The truest conceptual expression of reality will always be a paradox. "A saint (bodhisattva) is a saint because there is no saint," says the Perfection of Wisdom school, "and that is why there is a saint!"[1] Concepts are applicable in the conventional sphere only. This is the place of commentary and research: such projects can clarify the nature of the phenomenal world and discuss the relative validity of various theories within that plane. Neither the Buddha nor Nagarjuna would have said that the rational faculty has no function, for, though no theory is absolutely true, some theories are certainly better than others. When one wishes to speak of the ultimate sphere, thoughts can point the way towards a proper understanding of it and teach one how to achieve the Perfect Wisdom which can perceive it, but theories themselves cannot express its nature.

As a conventional truth, the Madhyamika philosophy propounds a system of ordering one's thought, and then it shows where such thought must end. This system includes the theory of dependent arising, the four Noble Truths, the constitution of the psychophysical personality, and the Noble Eightfold Path; the theory of emptiness points out the limit of the mental faculty. Nagarjuna demonstrates that all of his ideas are pragmatic only in one of the most famous verses of his treatise:

---

[1]quoted in Nagao 1989, vii

"We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path."[1]

This verse succinctly ties together his entire philosophy, shows where it comes to an end, and defines the point of it all.

Nagarjuna's thought can be summed up in the first two terms of the verse: dependent arising and emptiness. From these all other elements of his philosophy are derived. Dependent arising explains all aspects of the relative world, for it details the process of causation and, hence, the ontology of the world. Emptiness is the only possible description of ultimate truth, for it demonstrates relativity and provides a sort of anti-theory on which the rational faculty can focus. Neither of these, though, should be relied on as valid in themselves, for they are both "dependent upon convention."[2] Kalupahana's translation was used here because, while not necessarily more accurate than any others, it is clearer and more succinct. Any theory, even one as all-encompassing as emptiness, is still a theory based on convention. Were there no dependently arisen things, there would be no theory of dependent arising. Further, even though these things are empty, they are at least phenomenally real; if they were not, there would be no theory of emptiness, for there would be nothing on which to base it. The whole of Nagarjuna's philosophy is dependent upon convention, for it all presupposes the perception of everyday things and their phenomenal reality. It is vital that one following his philosophy understand that it, every bit as much as the things it describes, is relative. Dependent arising and emptiness are relative to each other, and both are relative to the perceived world. They thus constitute a middle path. One must remember that dependent arising would be no more proper a description of ultimate truth than emptiness, and vice-versa, else either materialism or nihilism would result. Likewise, one must find a middle ground between theorizing and refraining from doing so. The philosophy of Madhyamika is of vital importance, for it explains reality and points the way to an escape from it. Were one to accept no philosophy, the mental faculties would be ungrounded and directionless. On the other hand, one must remember the proper place of philosophies as based on convention only; they have no final validity. This, Nagarjuna says, is the middle path of the Buddha.

Perhaps the most important thing demonstrated by the equation Nagarjuna presents in the above verse is that the Madhyamika philosophy is,

---

[1]karika XXIV.18

[2]The original of this latter phrase, sa prajnaptir upadaya, is a famously difficult one to translate. For example, Nagao renders it "a designation based upon (some material)," Ramana as "derived name," and Sprung as "a guiding, not a cognitive, notion, presupposing the everyday."

in its essence, very simple. "Independently realized, peaceful, unobsessed by obsessions, without discriminations and a variety of meaning: such is the characteristic of truth," he says.[1] The one clear perception underlying Madhyamika is the interconnectedness and complete dependence of all things. Becoming and being, past and future, reality and emptiness, subject and object, arising and ceasing are all real things, but only in relation to each other. None exist absolutely. Unfortunately, this insight, while utterly simple and clear, is not so easily explained. The function of language and concepts is to make distinctions and impose artificial boundaries. The very word "define" has in its roots the connotation of creating boundaries (de + finis). The Buddha and Nagarjuna had no choice but to explain their insight into the nature of reality in philosophical terms, formulas, and theories. Nagarjuna's brilliance lay in his ability to explain it so clearly, and then to build such effective safeguards against excessive philosophizing into his system.

Ultimately, the one thing that is of importance is the Buddha's three-faceted teaching of transitoriness, soullessness, and suffering, the goal of which teaching being freedom. Only in light of this can Buddhism and Nagarjuna's enterprise be understood correctly. Rejecting all conceptual extremes and advocating a middle path is not an exercise in philosophy, but an aid to help people escape suffering and become free. The Visuddhimagga expresses poetically but succinctly the reality that remains when the Buddha's teachings are truly understood:

"Misery only doth exist, none miserable, No doer is there; naught save the deed is found. Nirvana is, but not the man who seeks it. The Path exists, but not the traveler on it."[2]

---

[1]karika XVIII.9

[2]Visuddhimagga, quoted in Warren, 146

Chapter 10. Epilogue

This research project was not merely an academic exercise. I would like to address briefly what I consider to be the importance of Madhyamika to our modern world, Occidental or otherwise. To my knowledge, there has never been in recorded history a philosophical system so exhaustively apophatic as Nagarjuna's that was not also a nihilism. Even Zen, the champion of paradox, is not really either apophatic or a system. I have defended the value of Madhyamika within the Buddhist tradition as being a defense of and an explanation of the twin doctrines of soullessness and transitoriness, the purpose of which being an aid to escape suffering. Outside the Buddhist tradition the importance of Madhyamika is slightly different, for it is not likely that the Western undercurrents of essentialism could easily be unseated — nor would I want to. One value of this philosophy for the West lies in its potential to undercut the habits of "I-making" and grasping, both grasping onto the things of the world and grasping onto the products of rationality. Another value is the contribution Madhyamika could make to Western philosophy and theology.

Many of the structures of the modern world are based, in some way or other, on distrust of individual authority. For example, that which has become American democracy is rooted in a party system. The hope is that, if two or more parties compete for election and for legislation, then compromises will emerge in the long run, and no individual will have too much power. The method on which science is based is founded on a similar safeguard. One can never prove, but only disprove. Third, the quest for objectivity underlying all academia certainly betrays this distrust. There is a strong emphasis on removing all personal reference from research and attempting to make it uninfluenced by any personal emotions or prejudices. These safeguards are necessary components of the structures we have. However, it is not certain that these structures are the only option.

The Buddha's teachings demonstrate that, in a way, emphasis on the self is the root of all evil. It is an excessive "selfishness" that causes one to desire passionately, to assert forcefully one's opinions and thoughts, to want to be right, to desire to possess. "Selfishness" is that which, in whatever situation, causes one to seek one's own well-being and ignore the thoughts and needs of others. The Buddha's path, especially as enunciated so radically by Nagarjuna, subverts this "I-making." I do not know what the result would be if the doctrine of soullessness were introduced

into our systems of politics, science, and academia, but my suspicion is that the results would be beneficial.

The other importance of Nagarjuna's agenda for me is the impact it could have on our rational structures of philosophy and theology. There are many discerning thinkers in these fields whose philosophies are in no way simplistic, but there are far too few. A study of Madhyamika philosophy has not forced me to abandon my belief in concepts like God, the soul, and the afterlife. What it has done is shown me, if I am to retain those beliefs, of what they may and may not consist. Nagarjuna's teaching of emptiness can vastly deepen and enrich one's religious and philosophical notions. Further, his teachings can demonstrate to what extent those notions are self-created and, thus, which notions may be true, which false, and which merely helpful guides that must ultimately be abandoned.

The philosophies of the Buddha and Nagarjuna offer trenchant explanations of the constitution of reality, the function of the human mind, and the purpose to which an individual's life and, in some cases, academic career should be devoted. A study of Madhyamika, if approached with a receptive attitude, will complement any philosophy, no matter how antithetical.

Chapter 11. Bibliography

Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta. An Introduction to Indian Philosophy. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1960.

Edward Conze. Buddhism: Its Essence and Development. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Edward Conze, ed. and trans. Buddhist Scriptures. London: Penguin Books, 1959.

Edward Conze, ed. and trans. The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

Michael Coulson. Sanskrit. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1992.

Ainslee T. Embree, ed. Sources of Indian Tradition, volume one. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Etienne Lamotte, trans. Sara Webb-Boin. History of Indian Buddhism. Louvain-La-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988.

Ramendranath Ghose. The Dialectics of Nagarjuna. Allahabad, India: Vohra Publishers and Distributors, 1987.

John Grimes, ed. A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy. Madras: University of Madras, 1988.

Herbert Guenther. Buddhism: Tibetan schools. Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987.

Edith Hamilton. Mythology. New York: The New American Library, 1942.

Peter Harvey. An Introduction to Buddhism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Maria Ruth Hibbets. An Investigation into the Negative Dialectics of Nagarjuna and Candrakirti. Bachelor's Thesis, Reed College, 1991.

M. Hiriyanna. Outlines of Indian Philosophy. London: George AllenUnwin Ltd., 1967.

Nolan Pliny Jacobsen. Understanding Buddhism. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986.

William James. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York: The Modern Library, 1929.

David J. Kalupahana. Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1975.

David J. Kalupahana. Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1976.

David J. Kalupahana. Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way: the Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna. New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.

David J. Kalupahana. A History of Buddhist Philosophy. Honolulu: University of Hawaii

Press, 1992.

Michael H. Kohn, trans. The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen. Boston: Shambhala, 1991.

Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund. A History of India. London: Routledge, 1990.

Karen Lang, trans. aryadeva’s Catuhsataka. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1986.

Chr. Lindtner. Nagarjuniana: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nagarjuna. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

Donald S. Lopez. A Study of Svatantrika. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987.

Sir Monier Monier-Williams. A Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993.

T.R.V. Murti. The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. London: George AllenUnwin Ltd., 1960.

Gadjin M. Nagao. The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Gadjin M. Nagao. Madhyamika and Yogacara. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Geoffrey Parrinder, ed. World Religions. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1983.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Indian Philosophy, volume I. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1929.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore. A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Walpola Sri Rahula. What the Buddha Taught. New York: Grove Press, 1959.

Regington Rajapakse “Buddhism as Religion and Philosophy”. Religion. 1986.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, trans. Edward Conze. The Diamond Sutra. Poona, India: Ma Yoga Laxmi Rajneesh Foundation, 1979.

K. Venkata Ramana. Nagarjuna’s Philosophy. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1966.

Paul Reps. Zen Flesh, Zen Bones. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, (no impress date).

T.W. Rhys-Davids, ed. and trans. Buddhist Suttas. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969.

Richard H. Robinson. Early Madhyamika in India and China. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967.

Peter Della Santina. Madhyamaka Schools in India. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986.

Ninian Smart. The Philosophy of Religion. New York: Random House, 1970.

Huston Smith. The World’s Religions. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

David Snellgrove. Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Boston: Shambhala, 1987.

Mervyn Sprung. Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters of the Prasannapada of Candrakirti. Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979.

Theodore Stcherbatsky. The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana. London: MoutonCo, 1965.

Frederick Streng. Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967.

D.T. Suzuki. Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism. New York: Schocken Books, 1967. Shunryu Suzuki. Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. New York: Weatherhill, 1983.

Malaclypse the Younger. Principia Discordia. Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, (no impress date).

Frank Thilly. A History of Philosophy. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951.

L. Austin Waddell. Tibetan Buddhism. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972.

A. K. Warder. Indian Buddhism. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

Henry Clarke Warren, ed. and trans. Buddhism in Translations. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

Paul Williams. Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations. London: Routledge, 1989.

Kajiyama Yuichi. Madhyamika. The Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987.

Heinrich Zimmer. Philosophies of India. New York: Meridian Books, 1957.

Index